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“A Free Palestine from the River to the Sea”: The 9 Dirty Words You Can’t Say (on T.V. or Anywhere Else)

Abstract

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The firing of Prof. Marc Lamont Hill from CNN for pro-Palestinian comments he made during a speech at the U.N.—and the subsequent targeting of Hill for firing by a trustee at Temple University where he is a tenured professor—represents a broader silencing of critics of US imperialism, global capitalism, and settler colonialism in the mainstream media and academia.

Keywords

Marc Lamont Hill, Palestine, Academic Freedom

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Cover Page Footnote

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No Justice, No Peace

It is not uncommon for a mainstream media commentator to be fired for a bigoted or violent comment on air—or off air. As far as I know, there was never a person specifically fired for advocating non-violence and the equal treatment of a group of people. I'm sure untold thousands have never been hired in the first place because of these views—but that's not the same as having those kinds of views being known and then later fired for articulating them for the hundredth if not thousandth time. That was until November 29, 2018 when CNN fired paid commentator (and Temple University Full Professor) Marc Lamont Hill for articulating a nuanced position of peace and justice through non-violence in Israeli-occupied Palestine. Hill called for the equal freedom and dignity of the Palestinian people, a people long violently oppressed and attacked by a colonizing power.

These facts are not in question. What is in question is whether Hill, at the end of the invited speech delivered at the United Nations to commemorate the International Day of Solidarity with the Palestinian People, also invoked a dog whistle for the extermination of Jews and the eradication of Israel. Despite the complete inconsistency of this interpretation with the previous twenty minutes of Hill's speech (and everything he has probably ever said and done), this was hardly enough to prevent the far-right wing media circus and pro-Israel/Zionist lobby, which dominates the U.S. media landscape and the whole of the two major political parties and their pundits, from unleashing on Hill. Within hours, it was widely believed that Hill was a virulent anti-Semite. Nothing could be further from the truth, as [Hill has repeatedly stated and explained](#) in multiple statements since.

A rigorous and righteous critique of Zionism is not identical to a hatred or even criticism of Jews or Jewishness. There is plenty of evidence and argumentation from Jews themselves that unquestioning support for Israel itself does a disservice to the Jewish tradition and Jews worldwide and in Israel. This argument was made most recently by Cornel West in [his defense](#) of Marc Lamont Hill.

The words in question are “a free Palestine from the river to the sea”—the latter four ostensibly being the genocidal dog whistle, a phrasing used by the Palestine Liberation Organization and Hamas (both organizations have been previously criticized by Hill for their use of violence in various contexts). If Hill's detractors had displayed any knowledge of anything about his politics, activism, or even the previous 99.9% of the U.N. speech, their outrage would be less disingenuous. If his detractors could show why his final statement, interpreted as a call for mass violence, was in any way consistent with any part of the rest of the speech or Hill's political or intellectual perspectives, they could be taken seriously, at least on a superficial level. This simply is not the case.

Furthermore, I contend, it was not the last four words that people had a problem with; it was the first three: a free Palestine. A free Palestine for a free Palestinian people. Free and equal Palestinian people. This is the true source of the grievances, which led to Hill being fired from CNN—and since, Hill has been [targeted by Temple University](#) for possible censure and/or firing, despite the fact that Hill has an endowed chair and the ostensible protection of tenure (to say nothing for

comprehensive free speech rights, which since Temple is a public university, are fully guaranteed by the oft-referenced and little-read U.S. Constitution).

While it is unlikely that Hill will be fired or forced out, the relatively recent cases of George Ciccariello-Maher (formerly) at Drexel University and Steven Salaita (formerly) at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign show that there are no guarantees for the public critics of white supremacy, global capitalism, U.S. imperialism, and Israeli settler colonialism and apartheid. The most critical topics in need of vociferous dissent are the ones being most aggressively censored.

I'm less specifically worried about Prof. Hill losing one of his side jobs than I am about the multitude of others who share his views and express them who will never be given a job, either on cable news or in academia. The chilling effects—especially for early career scholars, teachers, and journalists, who are the most vulnerable to sanction—are palpable and devastating, the results of which will surely harm millions if not billions around the world, not least of all the Palestinian people.

Apples, Bananas, and the Last Human Voice

The tragedy of Prof. Marc Lamont Hill's firing from CNN is worse for its broader implications. Hill was the only consistently leftist voice on cable news. He has been a long-time critic of police violence, structural racism, U.S. imperialism, and economic injustices in the U.S. and around the world. He has accepted both the label [socialist](#) and [Marxist](#) at times, and his arguments on TV and in his books are broadly consistent with those traditions—though they rarely involve the jargon typically associated with those traditions. He chooses his words carefully, but his meanings are rarely unclear. He has stood for working people, the poor, the oppressed, the colonized, the degraded, and the murdered.

He was the only cable commentator to oppose Hillary Clinton *from the left*. He was browbeaten by other CNN commentators and analysts. His appearances *weirdly* were fewer and further in-between. Hill refused to change his position on U.S. imperialism, and if one is a critic of U.S. imperialism, one cannot go on TV and call for people to vote for her. Putting aside debates about lesser-evilism and its dangerous pitfalls, going on TV to advocate for an imperialist would have ingratiated Hill with CNN and his Democratic Party consultant colleagues. More people have complied than haven't. He refused.

CNN has always been a network that turns war, death, murder, and injustice into spectator sports for profit. It has always been a network more comfortable paying neo-fascists, bigots, and regressive morons than it is with paying thoughtful left critics. CNN claims to be a "facts first" network. They run ads equating bananas with falsehood and apples with truth. Some are clever; most are not. Marketing criticisms aside, CNN continues to disgrace and debase itself with this decision. As I write this, Rick Santorum, who believes that gay and transgender people are inherently mentally-ill and criminals, that climate change is a hoax, that women should not have reproductive rights, and that none of us deserve affordable quality healthcare, is still employed at CNN, appearing regularly on its prime-time shows. But Marc Lamont Hill called for violence (in a speech about non-violence)? He must be punished! Talk about being fucking bananas.

It was already a tragedy nearing its end that there was merely one regular left voice on cable news. With the firing of Marc Lamont Hill, the process of recessing all the truly radical critics from regular appearances on mainstream airwaves is complete. While young people tend to get their news and information from “non-traditional” media, where there are thankfully far more left voices, what happens in the mainstream media, which is still consumed by the majority of Americans, still matters a great deal.

CNN didn’t make this choice out of principle. Hill’s appearances were seemingly increasingly irregular as he refused to play into the dominant narratives that hyper-focused on President Trump, so it was easy calculus for them. Avoid any semblance of anti-Israel (and by some perverse twist of illogic, anti-American) sentiment and fire Marc Lamont Hill. They did it for PR reasons. They did it for profit. I’m sure they are satisfied with their decision.

Though perhaps they should rethink that: Fox News’ host, and rat sphincter wearing human skin, Sean Hannity was giddy discussing Hill’s firing—and of course took several moments to connect an egregiously mischaracterized version of Hill’s comments to the entire “insanity” of CNN and it’s unprofessional anchors who are “too opinionated.” The irony was lost on him completely, and the meaning of Hannity’s and Fox News’ celebration of Hill’s firing was likely lost on CNN as well.

Sorry, Not Sorry

With all of that said, despite his righteous and radical declaration of freedom, equality, peace, and justice for the Palestinian people, Marc Lamont Hill [penned an apology](#) for *The Inquirer*. He apologized not for standing with the Palestinian people. He apologized not for opposing Israeli-Zionist settler colonialism. He apologized not for suggesting that the violence of the colonized was not equivalent to the violence of the colonizer. Instead, he apologized for triggering the misinterpretations of his comments that led to the outrage and subsequent firing.

There is one crucial flaw in this apology however, beyond it being completely unnecessary and equally understandable for all those familiar with Marc Lamont Hill. He has a profoundly generous and magnanimous reputation. The problem with the apology, though, is that it is articulated with a factual inaccuracy baked into Hill’s words (a factual inaccuracy he is no doubt aware of): the outrage that led to his firing and the now-informal inquiry by the Board of Trustees at Temple was not a good faith misinterpretation. It was not accidental. It was not a “natural” reaction to his supposedly genocidal words at the U.N. The misinterpretation was intentional from the start, and the outrage was exaggerated for political purposes. The people attacking Marc Lamont Hill—including CNN—are not rightly offended by a scholar and activist’s “poor choice of words.” His choice of words was perfectly fine. The outrage that Hill’s words spawned were because of their normative content; because of whom they were delivered to defend and support: the Palestinian people—as well as the entity they were deployed to criticize: the Israeli state.

Any genuine offense that was created by Hill’s words were undoubtedly not from Hill’s words themselves, but rather from the feigned offense of others intentionally mischaracterizing Hill’s words for political effect. His most recent book [Nobody](#) is a testament to his scholar-activist credentials and deeply felt compassion and care for the oppressed and exploited in the world. No

one—nobody—could read the actual words in that book and genuinely think that this author would ever defend the extermination of a people (not even cops). There are undoubtedly millions of people who could intentionally misread what he wrote, and he has no need to apologize for those intentional misinterpretations any more than he should have apologized for the intentional misconstruing of his comments on Israel and a free Palestinian people.

By apologizing as he did, while certainly representative of Hill's humility and selflessness and certainly clarifying for those on the left who may not have heard the original speech, I fear some of this ill-motivated criticism may have been unintentionally legitimized. The accusations of anti-Semitism were not offered in good faith in any way and treating them as good faith misinterpretations threatens to offer a gleam of honesty that neo-fascist Zionism will continue to abuse. Marc Lamont Hill shouldn't be blamed for this possible outgrowth of his apology; he was responding to an existential threat to his ability to make a living—and perhaps some perceived genuine misinterpretation that I simply refuse to believe exists.

For Palestinians, Not Palestine

This is just one contribution to an on-going and undoubtedly continuing discussion about the Palestinian people's right to exist as living beings with dignity, respect, and equaliberty, but it is important to emphasize here that there should be no defense of nationalism implied, interfered, or articulated. While anti-colonial nationalism is preferable to imperial bourgeois nationalism, it is a political dead end nonetheless. In the context of Israel-Palestine, while the discursive move of asserting the right of the Palestinian people to be citizens of a democratic nation-state is assuredly a positive and productive move insofar as it challenges US and Israeli capitalist imperial power, the liberation of the Palestinian people (and the working class people of Israel, many of whom do not support the far-Right Likud Party or the heinous war crimes of the Israeli state) will only be accomplished with aggressively solidaristic internationalism. Demanding political, economic, cultural, and social equality and freedom within all relevant political structures that affect the lives of Palestinians is not inconsistent with a ruthless critique of the modern state system and all of its attendant injustices.

This speaks to the final tragedy of the firing and on-going assault of Marc Lamont Hill. It was precisely for his passionate, thoughtful, informed, words of solidarity and support for the freedom of all people, especially the Palestinians, that he is being punished. While we must match his act(s) of solidarity with the Palestinians with our own words and deeds of solidarity with him and against his detractors, I don't think it is too bold of me to suggest that Marc would want us to put doubly more energy into supporting the cause of peace with justice and freedom for all peoples, which his own passionate support of has precipitated this absurd circumstance.