

Does Free Speech Include Hacking and Mayhem?
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We do not say often enough that freedom without responsibility is anarchy. This is exactly what we are witnessing in Europe and closer to home: the controversy about our Bay Area Rapid transit system, BART, pulling the plug on cell phones to preempt a dangerous riot.

A few weeks ago, BART security officers shot a transient who had advanced threateningly on them. Whether their action was warranted or not belongs in the realm of law enforcement investigation, not on mob rule. Had people come out to demonstrate peacefully (which is lawful), BART officials say, they would have no objection. But demonstrations in this country are required to have permits and are required to be non-violent. They are also limited to public space, not private space.

What kind of demonstration is organized en masse on cell phones? We cheer such demonstrations when they occur in a fascist state: say Iran or Mubarak's Egypt, where public assembly is banned. But in this country, or in Europe's modern democracies, free speech is certainly not banned. But what happens when that free speech is really a demonstration of intimidation, violence, and destruction of property? Is that freedom?

Imagine a violent demonstration on the narrow platforms of a rapid transit station. Who would be held responsible for loss of life or limb? BART would, of course. But when they cut off cell-phone communications at rush hour threatening public mayhem, the kneejerk reaction of civil libertarians was that BART was acting like Syria or Iran; they had no right to stop any freedom of speech.

Frustrated by the lack of public support for their actions, BART then closed several of the stations when threatened by demonstrations during rush hour. This too was criticized by commuters. Would these commuters rather take their chances with a rush of thugs on the platform, robbing and roughing them up? BART's mission is to transport people safely, to the best of their ability; and if they cannot do this, they must shut down.

Even more interesting is that none of the freedom of speech advocates seemed to mind when a notorious anarchist group, Anonymous, hacked into BART's computers to publish private information on line. What kind of \223freedom\224 is this?

Groups of \223youths\224 have been forming \223flash mobs\224 via cell phones to loot stores in Evanston, Philadelphia, New York, and elsewhere. It is evidently fun to do this-knowing that they can outnumber and intimidate police. Shouldn't the police be able to pull the plug? The same sort of thing has been roiling London and other British cities this summer, with not only looting, but arson as well.

Sweden is having similar anarchy in Malmo, a city with a majority Muslim population. The police are helpless against flash mobs that set schools on fire, and as each fire is put out, set new ones. Community policing is becoming ever more difficult as Malmo drops Swedish and opts for teaching Arabic from preschool up (paid for by the state, perhaps). But will there be schools in September?

France went through this sort of anarchy several summers ago, facing not only rioting, but mobs setting cars on fire. The lives of \223youths\224 in Europe and the United States bear no resemblance to those struggling against dictatorships in the Middle East. It is shameful to compare them. These thugs are not \223freedom fighters.\224 They are criminals, looting and burning because it is exciting, not because they are hungry or mistreated.

Anarchists organized violent rioting in Athens last year too: protesting against drastic (and unavoidable) cuts in benefits. The demonstrators considered themselves above the law and entitled to state money.

We are indeed in the midst of a culture crisis in which we had better decide if we want to live with law and order, or live like Afghans, never going out without armed bodyguards. Freedom is not without responsibility in a civilized society. And freedom of speech has limits too-when it comes to public welfare. Public safety should not be sacrificed for a false notion of \223unlimited freedom.\224

675 words

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