

Talking Sense about "Political Correctness"

Over the last seven years or so the expression "political correctness" has entered the political lexicon across the English speaking world. Hundreds of opinion pieces in newspaper and magazines have been written about political correctness as well of scores of academic articles about it and the debates in which the expression gained its currency. It is close to being received opinion in Anglo-American popular culture that a coalition of feminists, ethnic minorities, socialists and homosexuals have achieved such hegemony in the public sphere as to make possible their censorship, or at least the effective silencing, of views which differ from a supposed "politically correct" orthodoxy. Correspondingly, it has become a popular tactic, especially in conservative political circles, to accuse one's political opponents of being "politically correct".

In this paper I want to make a number of points about "political correctness". Although individually these arguments seem straightforward - and will hopefully be uncontroversial - put together in context they reveal the idea of a "politically correct", left-wing dominated, media or intelligentsia in Western political culture to be a conservative bogeyman. The rhetoric of "political correctness" is in fact overwhelmingly a right-wing conservative one which itself is used mainly to silence dissenting political viewpoints. But the same investigation also suggests that a "politics of speech" is an inevitable fact of social life and that some sorts of censorship are likewise inevitable. The question of censorship is therefore revealed as not "Whether we should tolerate all sorts of speech?" but "Which sorts of speech should we tolerate?".

Before I continue I should make it clear what I am talking about when I talk about political correctness. I intend only to discuss "political correctness" as it relates to the regulation and politics of speech. In treating "political correctness"

in this way I am deliberately narrowing the scope of my inquiry. In the United States, for instance, “political correctness” is used to refer to a whole series of progressive initiatives concerning changes to the literary canon taught at universities, the teaching of post-modern and critical literary theory and cultural studies, affirmative action for racial and ethnic minorities as well as women, sexual assault and harassment and regulations regarding campus “hate speech”.¹ In Australia, also, the term has some currency in the conservative attack on multiculturalism and on attempts to rectify the injustices perpetrated in the past and continuing in the present against Aboriginal Australians. Indeed contemporary usage of the term suggests that its application has arguably widened to refer to progressive politics as a whole. But despite such wider uses, its primary meaning in the Australian context, is to refer to the criticism and regulation of speech and it is the coherence and implications of this sense of political correctness that I wish to discuss.

Furthermore, even in this limited sphere, it seems to me that there are two discourses of political correctness in existence today, although one is rapidly being replaced by the other. Both of them purport to describe the same phenomenon, albeit in very different ways.

One of these, the one which is being overwhelmed, is what I shall characterise as a discourse from the Left, which embraces “political correctness” as the effort to be careful in our use of language in order not to exclude members of social

¹ For an account of the history and politics of the wider “political correctness” debate in the United States, see Wilson, John, *The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995). There is now an extensive literature on the “political correctness” phenomenon. For an introduction to this literature see the bibliography of Williams, Jeffrey (ed) *PC Wars: Politics and Theory in the Academy* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

groups, such as women, non English speakers, homosexuals or the disabled, from full political and civic participation and more generally to avoid expressing disrespect, whether intentionally or unintentionally, for members of oppressed or marginalised social groups.² Those who have been concerned with the politics of speech in this fashion are typically also concerned with social justice more broadly and are willing to enlist the state and redistributive welfare spending in the attempt to overcome the disadvantages facing various oppressed and minority groups.³

The other, a discourse from the Right, which is in my judgement the dominant discourse, is hostile to “political correctness”, which they understand as an attempt by the Left to impose a certain political vision on an unwitting community and to silence dissenting political opinion. According to the Right there are some things that people are not allowed to say, or are perhaps too frightened to say, because of the hegemony of a feminist, gay and anti-racist politics in the universities, media and intelligentsia. This notion of political

² In fact I have my reservations about the extent to which a Left wing discourse of “political correctness”, in Australia at least, did exist prior to and independently of the right wing attack on it. There was a concern with the politics of language and culture which was reflected in the promotion of gender-inclusive language and a sensitivity to issues of representation in general. But the term “political correctness” had no widespread currency. I suspect the use of the language of “political correctness” by some sections of the Left to refer to these commitments was the result of a failure to resist the discourse of the Right when the term began to appear in the popular press. For the origins and history of the expression in the United States, see Wilson, op cit, Chapter 1. For a brief history of the debate about “political correctness” in Australia, see Davis, Mark, *Gangland* (St Leonards, N.S.W: Allan and Unwin, 1997), Chapter 3.

³ See, for instance, Perry, Richard and Williams, Patricia “Freedom of Hate Speech” in Paul Berman(ed), *Debating PC* (New York: Laurel Trade, 1992), 225-30; Alibhai-Brown, Yasmin, “The Great Backlash” in Dunant, Sarah (ed), *The War of the Words: The Political Correctness Debate* (London: Virago, 1994), 55-75. See also the history of “PC” politics in the U.K. provided by Stuart Hall in “Some ‘Politically Incorrect’ Pathways”, in Dunant, 164-183.

correctness gained currency through the writings and activities of a number of high-profile conservative and neo-conservative authors in the United States, such as Allan Bloom, Dinesh D'Souza, Roger Kimball and Nat Hentoff, sometimes with the benefit of funding from conservative Christian think tanks. Its proponents are often religious traditionalists or cultural conservatives, are typically hostile to feminism, socialism and homosexuality and opposed to affirmative action programs and other redistributive social welfare programs.⁴

I will be largely concerned with the discourse of “political correctness” as it is used by the Right. One of my aims here however is to provide a qualified defence of the discourse of the Left.⁵

I. The first thing we need to do to understand the issues around political correctness is to distinguish between criticism and censorship. Much of the

⁴ Bloom, Allan, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1987); D'Souza, Dinesh, *Illiberal Education* (New York: The Free Press, 1991), esp. Chapter 5, “The New Censorship”; Kimball, Roger, *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991); Hentoff, Nat, *Free Speech for Me - But Not for Thee* (New York: Harper Collins, 1992). For an account of the involvement of conservative think tanks in the US in shaping the debate on PC and funding conservative authors see Neilson, Jim, “The Great PC Scare: Tyrannies of the Left, Rhetoric of the Right” in Williams, op cit. For more general discussion of the politics of the campaign against PC in the US, see the introduction to Berube, Michael, *Public Access: Literary Theory and American Cultural Politics* (London & New York: Verso, 1994). For the Australian case, see Davis, op cit.

⁵ Of course this distinction is somewhat overdrawn. It is a minor feature of the debate around political correctness that a number of prominent left wing and liberal commentators have seen fit to take up the usage of political correctness pioneered by the right. See, for instance, the contributions of Melanie Philips and Christopher Hitchens in Dunant, op cit. But it is the argument of this paper that, despite the liberal intentions of some of its proponents, this discourse of political correctness is a profoundly conservative one with reactionary consequences. See also Alibhai-Brown, op cit.

debate around political correctness treats the issue as one of censorship. But, in fact, most of what is labelled “political correctness” by the Right is merely criticism of opposing viewpoints, rather than the demand that the state should intervene to prevent a view from being heard. Thus, for instance, criticism of a film for being sexist or racist will be labelled as an attempt to enforce “political correctness” and thus characterised as an attempt to censor an exercise of “free speech”. But there is a large gap between criticising something and saying that it should be censored. Even if the critic’s review said something along the lines of “This is a terrible film. It is a sexist film. It should have never have been made and, now that it has been made, no-one should go and see it” this is still a far cry from saying that the government should have intervened to prevent it from being made or distributed. Indeed it is quite common for people to make the most damning criticism of an intellectual position they dislike but defend the right of their opponents to voice it. This is, after all, a standard liberal move. There are obvious dangers involved in censorship, due to the nature of state power, which may well give us cause to pause before we demand that the government should step in to prevent an opinion that we don’t like from being heard or voiced. But they give us no reason not to say that we dislike the opinion and that it is a stupid opinion that no-one in their right mind could take seriously. That’s criticism, not censorship, and it is a normal - indeed a necessary - part of political debate.

This slide between criticism and censorship is large part of what makes the right-wing discourse of political correctness so powerful. After all, no-one likes a censor. Usually, however, it is a dishonest slide. In fact, on the Left, calls for actual state backed censorship are uncommon.⁶ Most of what is labelled political

⁶ The exception of course being feminist campaigns against pornography championed by Andrea Dworkin and Catherine McKinnon. But these calls have notably also been supported by the Moral Majority and in any case have been largely unsuccessful.

correctness is just political criticism and thus, in these cases, discussion of the evils of censorship is a red herring. Recognising this distinction alone is sufficient to dismiss a substantial proportion of the uses of the term in day to day political life.

In many cases then, when the Right condemns “political correctness”, their real target is political criticism. But this hostility to criticism obviously occurs selectively. When people are critical of a racist’s public statements they are guilty of “political correctness” and by implication of siding with the censors. When the racist expresses their racist sentiments they are exercising their “freedom of speech”.⁷ This convenient flexibility as to what counts as censorship and what counts as speech is another feature of the right-wing discourse of “political correctness” which contributes to its effectiveness as a powerful conservative rhetorical tool.

Of course, it is possible for a repressive orthodoxy to grow up in a community. Governments are not the only source of effective censorship. There is also the possibility of, what Mill described as, “the despotism of custom” acting to effectively silence dissent.⁸ This informal but equally effective censorship may even be more pernicious than censorship by the state, which has at least the virtues of being explicit and usually heavy handed. Certain opinions might be so widely and strongly held in community that dissident views are subject to such a barrage of criticism that they cannot be heard or that people may become

⁷ This paper was written in a period following the election of an Independent MP, Pauline Hanson, to the Parliament of Australia. Hanson was widely criticised for her open racism. She responded to her critics by calling them “politically correct”. In the same period the Prime Minister, Mr. John Howard, refused to criticise her expression of racist views on the grounds that she had a right to “free speech”.

⁸ Mill, John Stuart, *On Liberty*, ed. David Spitz (New York: Norton & Co., 1975), 66-67.

too intimidated to voice them. And this is presumably what conservative critics of political correctness in are claiming has happened.⁹ This is apparently why so many, although not themselves racist, embrace the open expression of racist opinions - they admire speakers saying what others have been too scared to say, supposedly because of their fear of a torrent of condemnation from PC critics.¹⁰ I will consider the plausibility of this claim shortly.

Before I go on however, I want to note the irony of the fact that the conservative attack on “political correctness” actually concedes that criticism - mere speech - does have the power to influence and to silence others in politically significant ways. This is after all the starting point of a left-wing concern with the politics of speech. It seems therefore that the Left and the Right in the debate surrounding political correctness actually agree, contrary to traditional liberals, that the things we say and the rhetorics we use to express them may limit the possibilities for other different viewpoints to be expressed and heard and are therefore a proper subject for public political concern. Where they differ is on is their assessments of who is in danger of being silenced and marginalised in contemporary political discourse and what sorts of discursive practices are responsible for this silencing.

⁹ See for instance, D’Souza, *op cit*, Chapter 5. See also Davis, *op cit*.

¹⁰ It was for instance the implication of Australian Prime Minister John Howard’s claim after his recent election, in a political context where Independent MP Pauline Hanson had also been elected as an open racist, that there was a new atmosphere of openness in Australian politics and that this constituted a victory for “freedom of speech”.

II. The next thing which needs to be said is to point out that, in reality, the vast majority of both formal (state) and informal (social) censorship originates on the Right.¹¹

Before we get too concerned about the sorts of things that the Left would prefer we did not say, we should have a look at what sorts of speech we are already forbidden. In fact it's quite a bit. From time immemorial, governments have made it a crime to voice certain opinions in public and continue to do so 'till this day.¹² Thus, for instance, in most jurisdictions around the world legislation exists that forbids speech which encourages criminal activities or incites riots, which defames or libels, or which threatens the "national interest". There is also the censorship of film and literature which offends community standards, which goes on under the auspices of various boards of censors or offices of "Film & Literature Classification". Such censorship, by appointed panels of government officials or "upstanding" members of the community, goes on explicitly to prevent materials which offend prevailing community standards from reaching our shores. For most of history this has included such things as explicit representations of sexuality, writing about various forms of sexual experience,

¹¹ For accounts of the history of censorship in Australia, see Coleman, Peter, *Obscenity, Blasphemy, Seditious*, (Brisbane: Jacaranda Press, 1975), Martin, Brian et al (ed), *Intellectual Suppression: Australian Case Histories, Analysis and Responses*, (Sydney: Angus and Robinson, 1986), and Pollack, Michael, *Sense & Censorship: Commentaries on censorship violence in Australia*, (Sydney: Reed Books, 1990). For a discussion of censorship on the grounds of public morality in the United Kingdom and United States see MacMillan, Peter, *Censorship and Public Morality* (Aldershot: Gower, 1983).

¹² As Wilson, op cit, p 91 notes, the US Supreme Court "has accepted limits on free speech in cases of immediate harm, captive audiences, criminal threat, obscenity, immediate riot and time, place and manner restrictions." The relevant cases, according to Wilson, are "Shenck v. United States, 249 U.S. 47 (1919); Lehman v. City of Shaker Heights, 418 U.S. 298 (1974); Miller v. California, 413 U.S. 15 (1973); Brandenburg v. Ohio, 395 U.S. 44 (1969); Heffron, 452 U.S. 640 (1981)".

attacks on the church, communist “propaganda” and other materials deemed blasphemous, seditious or obscene.¹³ Censorship on conservative grounds has been enforced vigorously for most of recent history and it continues to occur, although less often, to this day.

Rather than being the work of feminists, socialists or homosexuals, the interests protected by this legislation are overwhelmingly conservative - which may go some way towards explaining why we hear so little discussion of these restrictions on “freedom of speech” in discussions of political correctness. Besides this array of legal prohibitions, the threat to freedom of speech from the Left looks insignificant. There simply isn’t any comparable state backed program of regulation of speech which is motivated by left-wing concerns. Admittedly, in various jurisdictions around the world, there is now legislation intended to deter incitement to racial hatred. But such legislation merely extends to members of ethnic groups a similar protection from harm as is granted to the nation as a whole. The idea that speech can be regulated to protect a group (i.e. the nation) from harm is, as I shall argue further below, already accepted across the political spectrum. The only thing new about legislation against incitement to racial hatred is that the group which is protected is sub national. Compared to legislation which exists to protect the “national interest” or the reputation of public figures from defamation, the legislation protecting members of racial groups from vilification is also typically weaker, invokes smaller penalties and is used less often.¹⁴

¹³ See note 11 for sources.

¹⁴ For an overview of legislation concerning “racial vilification” within Australia and internationally see Duranti, Victor, *Racial Vilification: An Overview of the Issues* (Department of the Parliamentary Library, 1994).

Perhaps critics of political correctness might admit that the main threat of censorship does not arise from the state legislating in the public sphere but instead originates from what they perceive as a rising tide of efforts to impose formal, but non state, censorship, in institutions such as schools, universities and perhaps the press. There have indeed been various attempts to introduce guidelines and in some case regulations into these institutions concerning campus hate speech, gender inclusive language use, sexual harassment etc. But again, concern for the public culture of institutions is hardly a recent phenomenon or exclusively or even mainly the prerogative of the Left. There have always been standards about what it was appropriate to teach and say and do in schools and universities. Repeated conservative outcries when sex or drug education groups try to publish materials which talk openly about gay sex or drug use or introduce them into the education system should serve to remind us that an enthusiasm for censorship from the Right in these forums continues to this day.¹⁵ Not only has popular political pressure often been brought to bear on these institutions to prevent “inappropriate” voices being heard within in them, but most institutions also maintain formal mechanisms of censorship which can be mobilised if radical voices are raised too loudly and too often. Most university statutes, for instance, contain provisions that allow that staff may be dismissed and students expelled for conduct which brings the university into disrepute. Schools have codes of behaviour which they expect their students to abide by and they may expel them if they do not. Most non-government publications which receive government funding are subject to formal restrictions as to the purposes to which it can be used or at least face the prospect of the withdrawal of their funding if they offend the (conservative) powers that be too grossly. Even in the supposedly left-wing arena of the schools,

¹⁵ For discussion of what he calls “Conservative correctness” on campuses in the US, see Wilson, *op cit*, Chapter 2.

universities and the media, then, it would be difficult to argue that the major threat of censorship arises from the Left.¹⁶

Perhaps the real threat to freedom of speech, then, occurs not directly from the government or in the universities or the media but in the workplace? In some jurisdictions around the world, laws have been passed concerning sexual harassment in the workplace which establish penalties for verbal or written sexual harassment such as unsolicited sexual comments, propositions or innuendo. Or, as a result pressure from the women's movement, corporations have themselves developed policies designed to curb sexual harassment which target speech of this sort. The existence of such policies is claimed by the Right as evidence of "political correctness". But again regulation of speech in the workplace is nothing new, nor is it solely, or even mostly, the province of the Left. There is a great deal of, almost entirely conservative, censorship which occurs in the workplace as a result of the restrictions placed on workers when they enter the wage-labour agreement. Along with the other freedoms which workers agree to forgo in return for an income goes "freedom of speech". In some cases the restrictions on the speech of workers will be explicit, as in cases when workers are forbidden to distribute union materials or organise in the workplace and when union officials are denied contact with the workers. Of course, these restrictions operate only in the workplace and leave workers free to speak their minds outside of working hours. But restrictions which bind workers outside of the workplace and working hours are also common. Workers in the public sector as well as many in the corporate sector are bound by confidentiality and privacy agreements which restrict their right to speak both inside and outside of the workplace.¹⁷ Even in the absence of such formal

¹⁶ For a discussion of "political correctness" and campus speech codes see Wilson, *op cit*, Chapter 4.

¹⁷ Legislation concerning privacy, commercial confidentiality and copyright in fact constitute a

regulation of speech in (and outside) the workplace there are almost always informal prohibitions which limit what is said in and outside the workplace implicit in the wage-labour contract. The sorts of speech forbidden by these informal edicts are by and large not racist or sexist remarks but rather criticism of management, complaints about working conditions, advocacy of unionisation or anything else the owners of the means of production disapprove of. Such limitations do not need to be made formal conditions of the employment contract because they are implicit in the power relation between the worker and management which allows management to threaten the income of workers. Workers who argue with or are disrespectful to their bosses, who speak up in defence of their wages and conditions or who express their true opinions about their firm's products or services to customers jeopardise their employment in doing so. Workers are well aware of what they can and cannot say within the workplace without risk of dismissal and those who are not are quickly made aware of these limits, often by reprimand or threat from the employer. Those who continue to voice "incorrect" sentiments are removed by sacking. Because they occur in the "private" sphere of contract between worker and owner, the implicit restrictions on liberty which are an integral part of the wage-labour agreement are one of the least acknowledged sources of censorship. Yet they prohibit "free" speech, for those who work, for eight hours of each day for most of their lifetime in a significant discursive sphere.

Thus far I have largely been concerned with formal or state sanctioned censorship. As critics of political correctness have aptly reminded us, a prevailing climate of opinion may serve to silence dissent just as or even more

whole class of restrictions on freedom of speech which are seldom recognised in discussions of the issue. See Drahos, Peter, "Decentring Communication: The Dark Side of Intellectual Property" in Campbell, Tom and Sadurski, Wojciech (ed), *Freedom of Communication* (Aldershot: Dartmouth Publishing, 1994).

effectively than the (not so) long arm of the law. So now let us consider whether a repressive left-wing orthodoxy exists in this country or indeed in anywhere in the world where the term “PC” has currency. Is the media or even the university dominated by feminists, socialists, Asians, aborigines and homosexuals? Are men, the business community, WASPS and heterosexuals scared to voice their opinions for fear of being howled down by a PC Mafia? When members of these groups do bravely have their say, is it the case that they are consistently ignored, dismissed, laughed at or otherwise not heard? I can’t see it myself. They are occasionally criticised, usually when they attack the rights or interests of members of less privileged groups and sometimes - even more occasionally - widely so, when they do so out of ignorance or malice. But these criticisms hardly silence them or prevent them from being heard. Indeed, if the media circus which typically surrounds open racists is anything to go on then these criticisms unwittingly provoke them to speak more loudly and be heard more often, as they are repeatedly sought after by the media to respond to their critics. The idea that there exists a repressive left-wing orthodoxy in public culture just seems laughable.¹⁸

In fact a much more convincing case can be made for the existence of a conservative political culture or orthodoxy which marginalises and silences progressive concerns. If one really wants a demonstration of the presence of “political correctness” in Australian culture then there is no better way to get it than to walk down to the local bar and start talking loudly and proudly about one’s gay lover or even just walk down the wrong street arm in arm with one’s same sex lover. Unless one is lucky, the importance of not straying outside the bounds of accepted opinion will be impressed upon you and most likely a good deal more forcefully than with a few politely spoken words of criticism. Less

¹⁸ Davis, op cit.

dramatic examples can be found if we consider the fate of feminism and socialism in mainstream political culture. It seems to me that allegiance to either of these ideologies would have to figure amongst the most politically incorrect statements to make in the current climate. Identifying oneself as either a feminist or a socialist more or less guarantees hostility, trivialisation and ridicule in most forums outside of the academy and some within it. So much is this so that many people are reluctant to identify themselves as such simply because of the misunderstanding and difficulties it causes. My own experience of raising issues about the undemocratic nature of capitalism in the prevailing political climate, even in the academy, is that those questions are simply dismissed. If they are not openly laughed at, they are at least not taken seriously. They are certainly not addressed. They are simply not fashionable. To put it another way they are not “politically correct”.

These examples could be extended indefinitely. Australian culture, like other Western political cultures, already maintains a vigorous, if largely unnoticed, sense of “political correctness”. But it is a conservative, white, racist, male-oriented and homophobic one. It was precisely in recognition of this that some on the Left became concerned with issues about the politics of representation and of language use.

Furthermore, in the current period the right-wing discourse of PC actually plays a key role in maintaining this conservative “political correctness”. Increasingly, criticism of the existing sexist and racist culture is labelled as “just more ‘political correctness’” and dismissed. Sometimes it will even be described as “the dictates of the thought police”, “intellectual fascism” or “Stalinist”.¹⁹

¹⁹ See Wilson, *op cit*, p23 and Neilson, Jim, “The Great PC Scare: Tyrannies of the Left, Rhetoric of the Right” in Williams, *op cit*, for lists of such references in the conservative literature on “political correctness” in higher education.

Painting one's critics as PC today achieves a number of powerful conservative rhetorical effects. It valorises the conservative's position by making it appear as though it were a courageous and free-thinking challenge to a repressive orthodoxy rather than the banal expression of bigotry it typically is. It distracts attention from the content of the criticism and reduces it to merely another attempt by those with totalitarian tendencies to censor free speech and in this way mitigates the need to respond to it. When people come to see that to speak out against sexism and racism means being misrepresented, ridiculed and dismissed, likened to Hitler and Stalin, they are less likely to do so. In this way the language of "political correctness", as used by the Right, itself serves to silence dissent.²⁰

III. As the preceding discussion should make clear, almost no-one on the political spectrum is willing to advocate that there should be no limits on public speech. If the Left would like to see racist, sexist or homophobic hate speech outlawed and other less explicit forms of sexism, racism and homophobia discouraged, the Right is by no means short of targets for the repressive force of the law or public opinion either. In case it is thought that an enthusiasm for censorship is a trait of extremists at either end of the political spectrum but not of the enlightened liberals in the middle, let me remind you that the prospect of immediate and substantial harm to others occurring as the direct result of an act of speech, at least, is considered by almost everyone to justify censorship of some sort. To raise the hackneyed philosophical example, few are prepared to defend the right of the troublemaker to cry "fire" in a crowded theatre. Nor are too many people prepared to defend the right of a newspaper to personally

²⁰ See Fish, Stanley, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech* (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), Chapter 7.

vilify a public figure or deliberately publish lies about a community or business project or to expose the nations carefully constructed and concealed defence plans. The fact is that certain sorts of speech can harm important interests and this is generally recognised to justify restrictions on those types of speech.²¹

This might seem too obvious to point out but it is important. Critics of “political correctness” like to portray the debate surrounding it as a conflict between moralistic censors on one side and staunch defenders of freedom of speech on the other. But this is a misportrait. Change the sort of speech being defended and the staunch defenders of free speech are most likely firm believers in the need for restrictions on the liberty of some to prevent harm to others even in the realm of speech. This is an empirical fact about politics, but I cannot over emphasise how important I think it is for the understanding the debate around censorship and “free speech”. There are few theorists and no governments who would support absolute freedom of speech. Some sorts of speech, such as those which publicise the nation’s defence secrets to the enemy or which incite violence against members of the community, destroy the very fabric of the community which makes speech possible. The real debate around censorship is not about whether censorship is justified in some circumstances, because everyone agrees on this. It is about what justifies it. Once the debate is understood in this light it becomes more possible to have an intelligent discussion about whether or not harm caused to members of minority groups by certain sorts of speech act might justify restrictions on speech in exactly the same way as harm caused by libel or defamation to individuals justifies restrictions on our “freedom” to libel or defame or in the same way that the “national interest” justifies censorship.²²

²¹ See note 12 for a list of decisions in the US Supreme Court that the right to “free speech” could be limited on such grounds.

²² Fish, op cit, 106-11.

Not only is there an explicit consensus on the necessity of state and other sorts of formal censorship but there is also an implicit consensus, expressed in practice, on the important and necessary role played by various types of informal censorship. In personal conversation we naturally restrict the people that we are willing to talk to. If someone is abusive or ill-mannered or talks utter nonsense then we will point this out and eventually, if they persist in doing so, we will walk away. A certain level of respect for the other speakers is necessary in order to maintain a conversation.

But, as well as respect for the participants in a dialogue, we also recognise the need for respect for various conventions about the content of contributions to a discussion. In order for a dialogue or debate to flourish contributions to it must be, as much as possible, relevant, well informed, clearly expressed, productive, intelligent and otherwise suitable along any other number of dimensions. They should not be ignorant, stupid, obstructive, or irrelevant, etc, otherwise they will only hamper debate and frustrate the other participants. For this reason, in ordinary political practice we recognise the need for restrictions on the sort of material that one publishes in a given medium or tolerates in a particular forum. Editors select the material that they publish. Radio stations choose who they will interview. Chairpersons guide discussion towards the relevant issues and move to silence those who continue to dispute an issue after it has been resolved or whose contributions are otherwise unproductive.²³ These sorts of limits on

²³ The guidelines to the procedure of the House of Representatives of the Australian Parliament, *House of Representatives Practice, Third Edition* (Canberra: Australian Government Publishing Service, 1997), for example, contain an entire chapter (Chapter 13) on “Control and conduct of debate” which governs when Members may speak (458-465), the manner in which they may speak (465-470) and insists that “Of fundamental importance to the conduct of debate in the House is the rule that no Member may digress from the subject matter of any question under discussion” (470). Further restrictions on the content of Member’s speeches are

speech abound because speech is always for something. Our (and other's) speech is important to us not because we simply like to make noise but because we are involved in common projects with those we are speaking to. We are trying to decide a certain issue, seeking the truth, trying to resolve our disagreements without recourse to violence or debating legislation, etc. Speech is a means rather than an end in itself. But once we acknowledge this we can see that some sorts of speech, in some circumstances will not serve those ends - and thus the very same grounds we have for defending open debate will work in these cases to justify silencing these sorts of speech.²⁴

The point that I want to emphasise here is that the grounds we have for making decisions of this sort are always political. That is, they necessarily involve reference to our commitments about the issues at hand. The best way to recognise a stupid argument is that it consistently leads to stupid conclusions. Our judgements about the relevance or irrelevance of a contribution to a debate cannot be divorced from our understanding of substantive issues. Our assessment of what counts as a productive contribution will depend on what we think the debate is about and where it should go. In this way we are making political judgements about what sorts of opinions should be published or heard or criticised all the time.

So again we find there is a consensus on the need for informal forms of censorship. Indeed, as I will argue below, these are actually inevitable.

outlined at 470-485.

²⁴ See Fish, *op cit*, Chapters 8 and 9.

IV. Up to this point I have been talking largely about empirical facts about the politics of the debate around political correctness. I now want to introduce some more philosophic reflections about the nature of communication and the concept of “freedom of speech” which also impact on the debate. A quick excursion into semiotics reveals to us, I believe, that absolute “freedom of speech” is an incoherent notion. As structuralism and post-structuralism have argued, the meaning of signs is a function of the play of difference within a system of signs. The meaning of a word will be determined as much by what we cannot do with it as what we can. Indeed these are two sides of one coin. Thus the limits on our expression are simultaneously the enabling conditions of what we can express. This means that absolute freedom of expression is an impossibility. A person who was free to say absolutely anything, to express any unique concept which came into their head, because they were not limited by the range of meanings they had available to them could, paradoxically say nothing at all. Communication requires restrictions. It requires that our concepts have more or less determinate meanings. Our ability to say what we can is thus founded on our inability to say what we cannot.²⁵

But perhaps this is just “grammatical correctness” or “speaking properly” rather than, as I am suggesting, a form of political correctness? It is true that when these restrictions are uncontroversial they will simply appear as rules of grammar or conventions of proper speech. But, even if it is not challenged, the structure of language is neither devoid of political implications nor untainted by politics in its origins.

The system of differences which gives our words their meaning has political implications because it makes it easier to say some things and harder to say

²⁵ Fish, *op cit*, p103.

others. Some ideas will be easy to express in a given language because the system of differences will be structured to capture them. Others will be difficult to convey and even to formulate because the language will be founded on their exclusion. Even if it is possible, in a particular case to overcome these difficulties by constructing some complex phrasing to capture our intended meaning, the more elaborate elocutions that we need to use to convey our meaning when the words we have available are ill suited to us do not have the same force as the single words or snappy slogans of those whose ideas are already represented in the language. Some political claims will therefore be advantaged and others disadvantaged.²⁶

The existence of the debate about political correctness is itself evidence of the political significance of the language available to us. If the structure of the language had no political implications, if it genuinely didn't matter whether the person running the committee was called a "the chair" or "chairman", then the debate about political correctness would never have arisen. The vehemence of the Right's response to suggestions that we should change the way we speak is evidence that there is a political issue at stake.

The current shape of our language is political in origin because the meanings available to us for our expression are themselves determined by the past and present usage of others. Language is a social product and we all participate, although not always to the same extent, in its creation and the determination of the meaning of the words within it. But, as we saw above, not all meanings suit everyone equally. Some people will prefer a word to mean one thing, some another. Sometimes the attempt to impose a preferred meaning on a term will become the site of an explicitly political struggle, as in the current debate around

²⁶ Cameron, Deborah, "Words, Words, Words: The Power of Language" in Dunant, op cit.

political correctness. This debate is, amongst other things, a struggle over the meanings of our words and the possibilities of expression available to us. It is clearly a *political* struggle consciously engaged in by parties with political agendas and which are, at least in some cases, supported by organised political lobby groups.²⁷ But even when such explicitly political struggle does not occur, each usage of a word is a small act in a history which determines the meaning of that word and its possible future usages. Each usage enables some other possible usages and constrains others. No usage of a word is devoid of consequences for the ways in which others may use it. Every usage occurs in a political context which partially determines which usages will carry authority and successfully achieve their intended affects and which will not.²⁸

Thus there is always and already a “politics” of speech - a struggle over the correct way to use language. Although its political dimensions may go unnoticed until a controversy erupts, this is not something that the Left have invented. It has always existed because of the way language works. Saying that one stands for simply for freedom in this arena is therefore nonsensical, because any and every usage will increase our freedom to use a word in certain ways and decrease our freedom to use it in others. Which is not to say that there are not better and worse ways to use words. It’s just that these will not be distinguished by the extent to which they impinge on the ability of others to use them differently. It is the content of the meaning of the word which is important here - not the fact that it has one.

²⁷ See Neilson, *op cit*, for an account of how the campaign against “political correctness” was consciously shaped by the Right in the US and involved the provision of substantial funds to conservative ideologues by Right-wing foundations and think tanks.

²⁸ Cameron, *op cit*. See also Pocock, J.G.A. “Verbalising A Political Act”, *Political Theory*, Vol 1, No 1. (1973), 27-45 at 31-36.

Similar points are true at the level of culture and politics. Any political climate or culture promotes some ways of life and political opinions and discriminates against others. That's just what culture is. It is a community's set of conclusions and received opinions about the best way to lead a human life and consequently about the way we should order our society and behave towards those around us. It is impossible for a culture to include all forms of life and all expressions of opinion. This is not just a practical impossibility. It is a conceptual one. Cultures have a determinate content, they have world-views that they espouse and ways of life that they express and make possible - and these function to exclude other cultures.²⁹ Thus, for instance, we cannot have a culture where racist statements go unremarked and where the moral claims of racial minorities to full citizenship are taken seriously. Part of what it is to take racial justice seriously is to be offended and want to respond when people make racist remarks.³⁰ We cannot have a culture where homosexuality is publicly accepted and where children are "protected" from the idea that homosexuality is a valid sexual preference. As these examples make clear, facts about culture have political consequences and so culture itself defines a form of political correctness. Our culture determines what sort of behaviour is expected from people and what sorts of speech and behaviour will cause castigation and outrage. A society without political correctness would be a society without culture. It would be a society without shame, manners, or customs. It would be a society

²⁹ This is not to say that we cannot include elements from different cultures in our culture or even have a multicultural society. We obviously can. But what results is not simply a number of cultures coexisting - it is a different culture. And there will ways of life possible in each single culture which will not be possible in the multicultural society, such as those which require the participation of all members of society. Being able to speak the same language as everyone in ones society is a case in point. Bringing cultures together is therefore a process of subtraction as much as it is of addition.

³⁰ See the discussion of "reactive attitudes" in "Freedom and Resentment" in Strawson, P.F., *Freedom and Resentment* (London: Methuen & Co., 1974), 1-25.

where anything was possible and nothing frowned upon. It would be a society without values.³¹

Some form of political correctness is thus an inevitable fact of social life. Once the debate is seen in this light it is a question of taking sides. It is impossible not to limit the possibilities of expression in a culture. The issue then is whether one prefers to defend the “free speech” for sexists, racists and homophobes and thus diminish the possibilities for the voices of women, people of colour, immigrants and gays to be heard or whether one will defend the rights of members of those groups to be heard by condemning sexism, racism and homophobia wherever it occurs.³²

Perhaps the conservative case is that it is wrong for the government, or perhaps for any social group, to consciously concern itself with language and culture in this way. This claim would deserve more attention if the continuing outcry about political correctness weren't so obviously the result of conservative groups and, to a certain extent, various national governments, doing just that. Their hostility to political correctness is motivated by a conscious concern for the political and intellectual climate in which they find themselves. They are consciously trying to turn back the cultural clock to the nineteen fifties, when people had pride in the nation, faith in the wisdom of government and business and when women were too busy trying to achieve equal pay and indigenous peoples the right to vote to attack the government for its sexist and racist language.³³

³¹ Of course, in other circumstances this is a core tenet of conservative politics.

³² See Fish, op cit, Chapter 8.

³³ See Fish, op cit, Chapter 3.

But isn't there something very Orwellian about a government which is trying to change the way in which people use language in order to change the way they think? A large part of our hostility to the idea of a government consciously involved in shaping culture stems from justified concerns about the appropriateness and the consequences of involving state power in this process. Bureaucracies are simply not very good at shaping cultures and the instruments they have to do so are sometimes clumsy and often dangerous.³⁴ But to acknowledge these considerations is not to concede that the state should simply not be concerned with culture. The argument above sought to show that it is simply not possible to avoid engaging in a cultural politics. "Doing nothing" is a policy and one with cultural and political consequences. State action, even if disguised as inaction, inevitably impinges upon culture.³⁵ The question then is, should it do so consciously or unconsciously? An important fact to consider here, is that to remain unconscious of our responsibility for the culture in which we live is, in most cases, to adopt a conservative politics towards it. By failing to take conscious action we tacitly support the status quo. Once we've realised this, of course, to then say that the state should not be conscious of the affects of its actions on culture is to consciously recommend that it should pursue a conservative politics. But, given that the state is necessarily implicated in a politics of culture, I can see no *prima facie* reason to suggest that the state should

³⁴ Government have often been more successful at changing cultures than many of us would like to admit. They seem quite successful at maintaining broad ideologies for periods of decades and also occasionally of achieving quite specific changes in behaviours and belief system around particular issues. Consider for instance the success of efforts, by many governments around the globe, to reduce the road toll or to educate people around safe sexual practices.

³⁵ Indeed it is almost impossible for the modern state to even pretend to be doing nothing in the realm of culture. The modern state has already taken on the job of administering culture through its funding of the arts, control of school curriculum, responsibility for national holidays and a plethora of advertising campaigns surrounding health, civic pride, road safety, recruitment for the military etc.

favour a conservative rather than a progressive politics in this area. This needs to be debated on the merits of the politics rather than stonewalled by insisting that the state has no role in determining culture.

V. Of course criticism of some formulations of political correctness advanced by the Left is also possible on other grounds.

To begin with, “political correctness” is obviously not a label that one should rush to embrace. Telling people that they should be “politically correct” is setting oneself up for the accusations of smug superiority or totalitarianism that the Right promotes - which is why the Right have pushed the rhetoric of PC so insistently. If we do wish to consciously promote a certain politics of speech we should instead simply insist that one shouldn’t be racist or sexist. Instead of talking about “politically correct” language we should criticise racism or sexism where it appears. This puts the onus where it belongs, on the Right, to explain why the speech at issue isn’t sexist or why we should tolerate racist or sexist speech. This is safer rhetorical ground than being forced to defend “political correctness”.

But more importantly, concern about the politics of speech and culture should not distract our attention from the inequalities of political, economic and social power which underlie them. Changing the names by which we refer to things does not in itself change the things themselves. Political action addressing the social, economic and political inequalities which result in the marginalisation of certain groups in language and culture is necessary. While it is undoubtedly true that the marginalisation of oppressed groups in language and culture works to maintain their oppression and reinforce their marginalisation in other spheres, it is not clear that addressing the problems at the level of language will in itself

have much affect at all on the deeper political, social and economic injustices. On the other hand, addressing these injustices is likely to greatly accelerate the process of the transformation of language and culture. It would be wise then to concentrate on this latter project.³⁶ To an extent, the current interest in the politics of language and culture is the result of the retreat of the Left into the academy and the bureaucracy from which vantage points it has been unable to exercise much influence over these more traditional political matters. Unable (or unwilling) to participate in any mass based movement which might transform the political and economic structure of society the Left has been content to fiddle about with new speech codes or (more creditably) legislation outlawing discrimination. The irrelevance of these initiatives to the problems, such as low wages, unemployment, the rising cost of living and homelessness, facing a large number of the members of the very groups they are intended to serve goes a long way towards explaining the strength of the backlash against “political correctness” even amongst members of these groups.

A complex set of issues about the value and function of state power is also raised by proposals that progressives should enlist the state in their efforts to transform culture. The state is a conservative institution which is both disinclined and ill suited to achieve many of the Left’s goals. It may be that attempts to use the state to promote a tolerant culture or to restrict racist and sexist speech will backfire and any resulting legislation be employed mainly by the Right against those very groups it was intended to serve. But unless one is prepared to argue that this is inevitably the fate of any and all attempts by the Left to win political ground via the state - which would, it seems to me, be foolish - then this will need to be argued on the details of each proposed piece of legislation. Legislating from above also looks unlikely to achieve the deep social consensus

³⁶ Ehrenreich, Barbara, “The Challenge For the Left” in Berman, op cit, 333-338 at 336.

which is necessary to ensure a genuinely non racist or sexist society. It may even generate resentment which results in political effects contrary to its intentions. On the other hand, legislation also functions as a statement of social consensus and can therefore send a clear message that certain sorts of behaviour are not welcome in our community. The political struggle to achieve such a consensus may itself provide a valuable focus for political activity through which to raise the level of political consciousness around the issues in the community at large. For this reason even legislation which one admits is never likely to be enforced may be worth fighting for.

These criticisms are importantly different to those which are made on the Right. They do not proceed from the disingenuous assumption that attempts to be conscious of the politics of speech and culture involve anything new or necessarily oppressive. Instead they engage in a genuine debate about the politics of particular attempts to regulate speech. They contest the importance and effectiveness of such regulation rather than the right to engage in it. This does not mean that we should deny that the ability to formulate, express and have an opinion heard is an important political freedom which is crucial to the functioning of a democratic society. Indeed, casting aside the illusion of "free speech" as maintained by the Right in favour of an awareness of the fact that speech is always already regulated, both formally and informally, makes us better able to consider the politics of such regulation and work to ensure that it is the best possible. Only by recognising both the existing constraints on speech and the inevitability of some such constraints can we hope to establish a community in which all those voices whose expression is consistent with the values of our community can be heard as equals.

VI. There will inevitably some critics who will believe that I have completely missed the point. The fact is, they will say, that political correctness has gone too far and that some sections of the Left have adopted a victim mentality wherein the slightest deviation from Left political orthodoxy is seized upon as evidence of sexism, racism or homophobia. Le Pen's politics aren't racist. Referring to a woman by her husband's name isn't sexist, etc. The problem with contemporary "politically correct" intellectual culture is that it is simply too quick to condemn persons as bigots for a failure to use the proper political jargon or for stating opinions which are currently unpopular. There may even be a grain of truth in this claim, although I admit I am sceptical. I am obviously not going to claim that no-one has been falsely accused of being sexist or racist or otherwise bigoted. There is a genuine issue here. But the point is that the debate should go on at this level; as a discussion about whether or not certain statements or positions are racist or sexist or whatever. Claiming that one's critic's are being "politically correct" for even raising the question is so much mud in the water.

Throughout this paper I have tried to show that what the Right has attempted to characterise as a new tyranny of the "politically correct" is either a gross misrepresentation or just the normal operations of politics, language and culture. Left-wing proponents of political correctness are not advocating anything new when they suggest that some sorts of opinions and behaviours should be considered as beyond the pale and cause for criticism. What is new is that instead of accepting that the bounds of respectable opinion should be defined by reverence for God, Queen, Property and Nation, the Left has suggested that they should be delineated by respect for persons regardless of race, gender or sexual preference. Of course whether it should be decided this way or that way is a political question.

Instead of talking about “political correctness”, then, we should be talking about politics. We should be arguing about whether certain sorts of speech are sexist or racist and about the consequences of tolerating them or regulating them. We should be examining the content of our culture and taking honest stock of whose voices are silenced and whose promoted. We should celebrate the widespread criticism which occurs when someone puts forward a racist or sexist opinion rather than defending their right to do so as “free speech” while at the same time trying to silence their critics with accusations of censorship. Even when censorship is on the agenda, instead of mouthing off about “the evils of censorship” we should admit that we all agree that censorship is sometimes justified and get down to discussing whether or not it is in this case. We should be doing all this without talking about “political correctness” at all.

The expression “political correctness” serves only to cloud the real issues at stake in debates around the politics of speech - which is why the Right have promoted it so vigorously. It confuses criticism with censorship and deliberately mobilises the public’s fear of state regulation of speech where this is clearly not at issue. It does this despite the Right’s own extensively documented enthusiasm for using the powers of the State to silence its critics and despite the extensive restrictions on “free speech” which exist to this day. It ignores both the fact that everyone across the political spectrum agrees that some sort of censorship is justified and the more philosophically interesting truth that some form of censorship is actually necessary to enable productive debate to occur at all. By implicitly opposing “political correctness” to “political freedom” it deliberately obscures the fact that the alternative to a left-wing political correctness is actually a right-wing political correctness. These confusions and obfuscations are no accident. They serve a political agenda. The main function of the right-wing rhetoric of “political correctness” is to attempt to further marginalise the Left and to silence dissent. Those who do not wish to

participate in this silencing should work to expose this rhetoric for what it is wherever it occurs.³⁷

³⁷ I would like to thank Robert Goodin and Krysti Guest for discussion, comments and support during the writing of this paper.