# Editorial: Free Speech and Political Correctness

More than shielded rape cultures on campuses, more than the rise of STEM education (science, technology, engineering, math) and the concomitant decline of the liberal arts, and more than many other issues, controversies over free speech currently plague university life. In his spring commencement address at the University of Notre Dame, U.S. Vice-President Mike Pence condemned "suppression of the freedom of speech," and lamented that "free speech and civility are waning on campuses across America," as many graduates silently walked out of the auditorium.

Indeed, a 2016 Gallup Poll about "Free Expression on Campus" reported that 54% of college students say the climate on their campus prevents some people from saying what they believe because others might find it offensive. Yet 78% of college students say colleges should expose students to all types of speech and viewpoints rather than prohibit biased or offensive speech. The implicit charge was that college campuses have become cocoons of political correctness, and shifted from policing protesters to policing speech.

Nicholas Dirks, former chancellor of the University of California at Berkeley, an epicenter of the furor, wrote in the *Washington Post* this summer that "the current round of attacks – from the extreme right and left — is a pretext. It is part of a broader assault on the idea of the university itself: on its social functions, on the fundamental importance of advanced knowledge and enlightened debate, on the critical role of science and expertise in public policy, and on the significance of intellectuals and serious thought leaders more generally."

In the public square beyond the campus, a whole new lexicon has emerged as the "alt-right" (the far-right movement based on white nationalism, anti-Semitism, anti-immigration, anti-feminism, and anti-homosexuality) faces off against what they derisively term "S.J.W.s" (social justice warriors) and the "antifa" (anti-fascists who confront white supremacists), both sides inhabiting their own online "bubbles," or "silos," or "echo chambers." Meanwhile, bigots justifying expression of oppressive views as their right to free speech distain those whom they mock as "snowflakes" (hypersensitive, fragile people who take offense too easily), including trauma survivors who want "trigger warnings" (alerts about disturbing content, now expanded to include race, class, sex, and even privilege) and minorities who seek "safe spaces" (places where sexual, racial, and ethnic minorities do not have to defend themselves) that are free from "micro-aggressions" (indirect, subtle, and sometimes even unintentional discrimination). And so on.

What is notable historically about free speech issues today is who is claiming that their human rights are being violated by being silenced, and by whom, on what issue, and how. As social power cycles through opposing ideologies and public sentiment follows along, it is always

the not-yet-enfranchised and the recently disenfranchised who fight to gain or maintain a public voice. Today, it is the political right claiming their freedom of speech is being censored by the political left via social norms of political correctness. True enough, mob censorship by campus groups now shouts down or shuts out certain voices, sometimes simply by pulling fire alarms.

Political correctness currently refers to values, norms, policies, and language intended to avoid offending or disadvantaging any particular group of people in society. The phrase points to the principle and practice of egalitarianism, which is the belief in equality of human social rights and opportunities. But the phrase is far from a neutral descriptor. It is a pejorative term used to disparage and deride what is deemed to be unjust, excessive, liberal dogmatism. Political correctness, say its conservative critics, unfairly curtails their values and freedoms, and their right to express and live by those values.

Though the concept of political correctness has a longer history, its current meaning entered everyday parlance during what James Davison Hunter (1992) termed the "culture wars" raging in the 1990s, when traditionalists/conservatives were pitted against liberals/progressives, not as separate camps, but as factions within every social institution, not just religion. At the time, political correctness became the charge levied by conservatives, who until then had held cultural sway, against progressives who were gaining cultural sway. Ever since, the accusation of political correctness connotes at best the manipulative invention of liberal elites, and at worst a neo-fascist assault on the good common sense of ordinary people.

Politics, by definition, is any action involving the use of power to shape the collective pursuit of collective goals. It's all about who gets what, when, and how, or as Ambrose Bierce put it in *The Devil's Dictionary* (1911), "a strife of interests masquerading as a contest of principles." Every society has values that guide it, norms that regulate it, and language that makes those values and norms seem natural, instead of merely normal. Every society has a segment of the population powerful enough to shape those values and norms, and to impose their definition of the good and natural on the rest of their society. That's politics.

Those who disagree with contemporary egalitarian values and their resultant norms are the ones who scorn them as mere political correctness. The obvious irony is that they clearly have their own contrary version of what is politically correct based on hierarchal values, a version that has until recently had the power to shape the values, norms, and language of our society. Theirs was the prior political correctness, which is now being challenged by an opposite political correctness. But there has always been one predominant political correctness or another. At issue is which values and norms, together with legitimating language, should characterize our society now and in the future. That's important.

A further irony is hearing contemporary conservative critics of political correctness invoke the rhetoric of the progressive writer George Orwell. In his renowned dystopian novel *Nineteen Eighty Four* (1949), Orwell advanced the notion of "newspeak," which was the

controlled language of a totalitarian state trying to make it impossible to talk, and possibly even to think, about ideas that challenged the established order. Given the political reversals since Orwell's day, it is dethroned conservatives who now assert that "in a time of universal deceit, telling the truth becomes a revolutionary act" (erroneously attributed to Orwell), that "truth is the new hate speech" (best attributed to Pamela Geller), and that "truth sounds like hate to those who hate truth."

So what is truth? Philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre's influential book entitled *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (1989) got the real question right: whose truth? It is not as if only "we" have truth and "they" just have an "ideology" or "agenda." We all have an ideology and agenda, based on what we accept as authoritative truth. And what is held consensually as political truth and/or virtue at any given time and place is determined by social power. That is not to deny the existence of ultimate truth and virtue, only to acknowledge that its character is constantly contested, and that its prevailing definition is the passing privilege of the powerful.

The charge of political correctness, as currently understood and employed, is a historically naïve and rhetorically tiresome accusation, because to condemn political correctness is to engage in the practice while debating the content.

Furthermore, the right to free speech does not include the right to be heard on any and every, especially privileged, platform, as the Notre Dame graduates were demonstrating by their exit. Those who are psychotic, ignorant, or malicious have their right to speak freely, but they hardly deserve an audience. That is simply one consequence of the reality that ideas have consequences, whether that be political isolation or simply being ignored, which is, notably, no threat to human rights or to democracy.

Of course, freedom of speech, like freedom of religion, is not an absolute human right. Here in Canada, none of the Fundamental Freedoms in Section 2 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms are absolute. All are subject to "such reasonable limits prescribed by law as can be demonstrably justified in a free and democratic society." As in other Western democracies, Canadians do not have the legitimated right to say anything anywhere anytime, just like they do not have the legitimated right to do anything anywhere anytime in the name of religion. As Jurgen Habermas (1975) taught us, legitimations are ideas generated by a social system to support its own existence, and in the end, by definition, legitimacy is always only granted by some social consensus.

Nor is freedom of speech an absolute legal right. As Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes famously wrote in a 1919 U.S. Supreme Court decision, "free speech would not protect a man falsely shouting fire in a theater and causing a panic." The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution allows governments to enact reasonable time, place, or manner restrictions on speech, and does not protect obscenity, fraud, or speech that incites imminent lawless action. Furthermore, Western democracies have laws against speaking hate, against publishing false statements that defame a person's character (libel), and against speaking falsehoods that

damage a person's reputation (slander). True, we are free to speak falsehoods, but we remain morally responsible for their consequences, something seemingly lost in this Trumpian post-truth era of fake news and alternative facts.

Other than hyperbole or spin, a falsehood is a perceptual issue of the erroneous apprehension of reality. A denial, in turn, is a willful issue of repudiating the reality of, say, intersex people or climate change. But a lie is a moral issue of the intentional effort to deceive. Most mainstream news media have traditionally avoided the accusation of lying out of respect for the possibility that someone making a demonstrably false claim might actually believe it to be true. Now, not so much.

Simple error aside, speech becomes problematic when it is illegal, immoral, or insensitive. Some views of gender, race, and religion have a history of oppression, and do in fact trigger trauma, hence the need for sensitivity beyond mere civility. In *Free Speech: Ten Principles for a Connected World*, Timothy Garton Ash addresses religion as principle No. 6, asserting that all faiths deserve to be respected for one reason or another. In honoring them, we validate our own (ir)religious faith by granting credence to the practice of all faith.

Freedom of expression is broader than freedom of speech, and more than the flashpoint of athletes "taking a knee" or locking arms for the national anthem this fall, it includes the social practice of cultural (mis)appropriation. Cultural appropriation is one culture's respectful adoption of elements from another culture, such as practiced throughout history as part of intercultural dialogue and diffusion. Cultural misappropriation, in contrast, is a dominant culture's colonizing use of elements from a marginalized culture as mere amusement with the "exotic" and often stereotyped "other." By misjudging or ignoring the depth of meaning those elements hold in their native context, it trivializes and tramples the marginalized culture. What the culture of origin experiences as desecration, the culture of entitlement defends as freedom of expression.

For example, it is one thing for white Americans and Canadians to adopt the originally pejorative terms Yankees and Canucks to name themselves. It is quite another to adopt derogatory terms for other people groups and name our sports teams the Redskins or Eskimos, and have the audacity to claim that doing so honors them. It is no more culturally appropriate to wear a war bonnet sacred to indigenous peoples as a party costume, than it would be for indigenous peoples to use the communion rite sacred to Christians as a party game. Freedom of expression does not justify it.

In liberal democracies, the all-purpose claim to the human right of freedom is frequently misused as the ultimate cultural justification for various behaviors and enterprises that do in fact harm others, such as the tobacco and pornography industries. And like them, speech is also a public health issue, not only enabled by human rights, but also obligated by human responsibilities. Yes, we are legally free, within limits, to offend with words, but we are also

morally compelled to be sensitive. Sticks and stones can break my bones, but words can break my spirit.

So what would Jesus say?

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