

Censorship Wounds Worse Than Words

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COMMENTARY

In the United States and Britain, ill-informed and poorly reasoned opinions about transgenderism, climate change, COVID-19, Islamic extremism, working-class political inclinations and voting patterns, race, sex, hate speech, and identity politics dominate progressive elites' thinking and drive their policymaking. This alone would pose no special challenge to freedom and democracy. Misguided views, short-sighted laws, smug moralizing, and abuse of power leave their mark in the best of times. They will persist as long as human beings remain fallible, self-interested, subject to appetite and emotion, and desirous of wealth, status, and dominion.

The deeper concern is the determination on the part of journalists, professors and university administrators, K-12 educators, government bureaucrats, high-tech titans and social-media moguls, entertainment-industry movers and shakers, and corporate executives – a preponderance of what was once called “the establishment” – to silence dissent from progressive orthodoxy through law and popular opprobrium. That puts liberal democracy itself at risk, not least by prompting the right to injudiciously retaliate with bans of its own.

Censorship degrades the quality of information available to voters and officeholders. Flawed assumptions, bad ideas, and haughty attitudes can be rectified by confrontation with sounder assumptions, better ideas, and suppler attitudes. The suppression of speech, however, deprives error of illumination. It converts legitimate positions to suspect products of special pleading and coercion. And it insulates true opinions from that contact with alternative perspectives, messy realities, and fiercely held conflicting convictions that transforms inert knowledge into living wisdom.

Censorship also undercuts the respect for fellow citizens and the rights of others that sustain political cohesiveness in a liberal democracy. By designating some opinions as unquestionable and others as unutterable, an overbearing majority – or a crafty and resolute minority – can purge the public square of those citizens who harbor proscribed thoughts and refuse to genuflect to authoritative conclusions. The right to free speech, moreover, is indissolubly bound up with all the other basic rights and fundamental freedoms. I cannot vindicate my equal rights to religious liberty, assembly, petition of government, self-defense, property, and due process of law without the opportunity – unencumbered by fear of formal government sanction and of informal social ostracism – to advance my views publicly and, also of crucial importance, to hear others offer their perspectives.

In his short book, "A Heretic's Manifesto: Essays on the Unsayable," Brendan O'Neill shows himself a hero of free speech and a champion of the moral and political conditions in which it thrives. The chief political writer for the maverick British magazine "Spiked," O'Neill argues "that the constant churn of political correctness – or cancel culture or wokeness or intolerance or whatever we're calling it – represents not just an over-the-top clampdown on speech, but a crisis of Enlightenment." The phrase "cancel culture," he stresses, fails to capture the gravity of the threat. "Every enlightened idea – science is real, race is not, women should have rights, freedom is good, reason is the best tool for making sense of our world – risks being crushed under the forever spinning wheel of correct thought," O'Neill writes. "Our curse is not just to bear witness to the intermittent silencing of controversial commentators, but to watch as liberty, objectivity, democracy, equality and the other great gains of the modern era are sacrificed one by one at the altar of new orthodoxies that pose, so falsely, as progressive thought."

O'Neill is not content, though, to faithfully record the outrages against liberty and clear thinking. His sizzling essays, which draw effortlessly on history and maneuver deftly through contemporary political culture, summon readers to keep liberty alive. The censors "can cancel our speeches, our jobs, our respectability, sometimes even our rights," he acknowledges, "but they cannot cancel this – the freedom of every person to think and believe as he sees fit."

Take, for example, "Her Penis," the essay with which O'Neill begins. "Nothing better captures the irrationalism of our age, and also the slippery authoritarianism of it, than the fact that this nonsensical phrase is frequently uttered, and as much in the respectable press as in the gender Bedlam of internet discussion forums," he states. One can appreciate O'Neill's indignation while affirming that all human beings are equal in rights, compassion and concern is due to those who suffer gender dysphoria, and respect is owed to those adults who have made an informed decision to bring their bodies in line with their gender. Nevertheless, his objection is simple. If you are a woman, you don't possess XY chromosomes and male genitalia, and if you possess XY chromosomes and male genitalia, you are not a woman. Yet the phrase "her penis," as he copiously documents, now appears routinely. In one egregious case, a British man convicted of rape and pedophilia who claimed to be a woman was sent to a woman's prison where he sexually assaulted two inmates. At trial, O'Neill reports, "the prosecuting lawyer described White's approach of one of the female inmates as follows: 'Her penis was erect and sticking out the top of her trousers.'"

The casual coupling of "her" and "penis," O'Neill contends, reflects not only the corruption of journalists and jurists but also a failure of judgment and reason. It shows that wokeness, contrary to progressive apologists, has sunk into official discourse. It demonstrates the willingness of experts and the authorities to deny nature on behalf of the new transgender orthodoxy. It confirms the power "of the cultural despotism plaguing Anglo-American society," which erodes clarity of expression, common sense, and science. And it brings into focus how, instead of honoring individuals, the proliferation of pronouns and the coercive measures

employed to spread their use – and penalize their misuse – induces subservience to “the religion of gender fluidity.” The amazing inroads in recent years – in schools, government bureaucracies, and corporations – made by the dogma that one’s gender is whatever one says it is illustrate George Orwell’s signature insight that control over language confers control over thought.

Progressive thought police, O’Neill argues in a chapter called “Islamocensorship,” also enforce the absurd view that the very notion of Islamic extremism expresses Islamophobia. One example is the charge made by British academics that criticism of the hijab – various head coverings worn in public by Muslim women – must reflect gendered hostility to Islam. It follows, O’Neill mordantly points out, that the Islamic Republic of Iran suffered a severe bout of Islamophobia last September when, following the death of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini at the hands of the police who had arrested her for failing to wear her hijab properly, young people across the country rose to protest Tehran’s mandatory hijab laws.

Just as it is a crime in Iran to criticize Islam, so too is it an offense against intellectual orthodoxy in the English-speaking academic world to call attention to oppression and violence within Muslim communities and Muslim majority nation-states. The penalties differ: “Here you’ll find yourself accused not of blasphemy, but of Islamophobia. Here you’ll be subjected not to physical lashes, but to a tongue-lashing – ‘phobic’, ‘racist’, ‘bigot’, all of it. Here you won’t be locked up, but you might be locked out – exiled from polite society and blacklisted from campuses for your profane thoughts.” But the silencing is similar. Reminiscent of Iran’s ayatollahs, U.K. and U.S. professors and bureaucrats in effect enforce prohibitions on blasphemy against Islam.

Where blasphemy is barred, cursing of the impure, the unclean, and the vulgar is required. A favorite target for the West’s woke is older, white, male members of the working class.

In “Rise of the Pigs,” O’Neill explores the casual contempt with which British intellectual and political elites disparage white men who voted for Brexit as gammon – cured ham or bacon. “So widespread was the use of the gammon slur in liberal and leftish chatter post-Brexit that, in 2018,” writes O’Neill, “the Collins English Dictionary chose it as one of its words of the year.” The reduction of fellow citizens to pig meat signifies their unfitness for politics. The evidence? They voted against elite wishes. The elites’ solution? Limit public discussion by controlling the information that reaches the people. While the proffered justification for the new censorship – as for the old – is separating true from false, in practice the restriction of access to supposed “misinformation” or “disinformation” aims to conceal or delegitimize facts, considerations, and arguments that distract from or weaken the progressive narrative. At bottom, the progressive assault on free speech reflects anti-democratic ire. The educated must censor because otherwise the clash of opinions will confuse the ignorant and gullible masses or, worse, empower them to vote as they see fit.

O'Neill warns that in the struggle to preserve free speech it is a mistake to deny its enemies' insistence that words wound: "It is precisely because words can wound, precisely because of their power to unsettle, that they should never be restricted." Although not the goal, pain and perplexity are inseparable from the exploration from which we learn who we are as citizens and human beings. Only by risking the wounds and daring to be disoriented can we arrive at a responsible understanding of what in our political societies must be conserved and what must be improved.

Woke censorship renders heretics – especially those who defy the prejudices of the age by defending free speech – more vital than ever to liberal democracy.

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