

Monica Lin

Professor Michelle Smith

Introduction to Political Theory

5 May 2019

Political Correctness and Its Use of Censorship to Stifle the Dismantling of Marginalization

Political correctness has permeated throughout the American social climate as a mechanism that wishes to eliminate differences by carefully censoring language and behavior in order to avoid reinforcing stereotypes and being offensive. Though it aims to assist disadvantaged minority groups, such censorship is avoidance — a mere surface-level solution that sweeps problems of marginalization under the rug. It focuses on the protection of one's immediate feelings, mainly aiming to censor language that could *possibly* spark discomfort, such as the phrase “Christmas tree” around someone who celebrates Hanukkah. There are some cases, though, in which political correctness is virtuous, such as when censoring the ‘n-word.’ This is because the ‘n-word’ is not simply about alleviating unease; it carries heavy implications of racism and oppression and as such, would be better left unsaid. Political correctness, then, as a term, is too broad, and though some politically correct actions can be considered virtuous, these few good cases are not redeeming enough to define the entire category as good, ultimately leaving it unvirtuous. More important for dismantling discrimination is understanding where prejudices come from and engaging in conversation about such prejudices so that stereotypes can be redefined, discrimination can be better comprehended and combatted, and marginalization can be dismantled to achieve the most just policies possible. Utilizing Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, I will emphasize that certain biological differences will always exist among different demographics of people, such as men and women, and that addressing uncomfortable stereotypes

head-on, not hiding behind political correctness, will help redefine woman's place in society. Then, I will discuss Allan Bloom's negative perception of society's "openness" as a weapon that has trained people to become mindless and indifferent to truth in the name of "tolerance" and how political correctness is a tool that does not lessen discrimination but upholds openness' preservation of sensitivity. Lastly, I will discuss how Iris Marion Young believes that inclusiveness of thought, even prejudiced thought, is needed for productive conversation so that all voices can be heard, leading to the most just, comprehensive solutions possible. Political correctness, then, will be shown as a social and political danger that stifles conversation, dealing more with avoidant language and failing to discover long-term solutions for marginalization.

Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, delineates the history of the oppression of woman, stating that there exist undeniable physical differences between man and woman, so what is to be done about these individual dissimilarities if political correctness wishes to censor them? Beauvoir's in-depth analysis of gender on both the microscopic, reproductive level and the macroscopic, physiological level makes it apparent that ignoring such differences is not the correct way to redefine woman's role in society. She begins her discussion of biological data with the cells required in sexual reproduction, stating that the male and female gametes play roles of equal importance, but how they carry out this role is rather different (Beauvoir, 26-29). In contrast to the male sex cell, the female gamete is larger, heavier, and immobile (27), and Beauvoir states that some have "deduce[d] from such an observation that woman's place is in the home," though this observation is misled (29). Moreover, she states that "woman is weaker than man; she has less muscular strength, fewer red blood cells, a lesser respiratory capacity... instability, lack of control, and fragility" (46). In themselves, these comments are not politically correct at all – they highlight the differences between man and woman rather than ignore them in

an attempt to establish equality; they are, though, *biologically correct*. Essentially, then, political correctness' aim of censoring these sex discrepancies does not stop them from existing. Beauvoir states that "these [differences] are facts" that "cannot be denied" (46). Alone, they do not carry meaning, but human perspective has come to utilize the body to define woman's place in society; Beauvoir says that "when the physiological given... takes on meaning, this meaning immediately becomes dependent on a whole context; 'weakness' is weakness only in light of the aims man sets for himself... and the laws he imposes" (46). As such, there is no inherent negativity in the notion that women are physically inferior to men; man took value away from woman because of his objectives and goals, shaping things like strength to best fit his own narrative. The problem, then, does not lie in the observation of biological fact, but rather, in how interpretations have utilized such facts as misconstrued justifications. Political correctness does not allow for the correction of these misunderstandings; for example, in the 1960s, many feminists began to demand that pronouns such as 'he,' 'him,' and 'his' be replaced with expressions like 'he-or-she,' 'him-or-her,' or 'them' (Baron, 85). Through a mechanism like this, political correctness wishes to establish equality between the sexes by drawing attention away from the notion of 'he' and evening it out by adding the notion of 'her,' but simply calling something that is a 'he' by 'them' or 'he-and-she' does not fix the issue. At the end of the day, that 'he' still has the organs, strength, and stability of a man; using language to assume equality in places where differences exist does not tear down stereotypes. Woman is indeed physically different from man and suppressing this notion will not halt her marginalization; as Beauvoir says, "these biological data are of extreme importance... an essential element of woman's situation" (Beauvoir, 44), and it would be mindless to avoid them. Instead, we should take such physical differences and redefine them; men originally allotted meaning to the physical inferiority of women, so it is our time now

to redefine woman in a less discriminatory fashion. For example, strength is viewed as good because society values productivity and such a masculine trait highlights endurance and work, allowing for increased ease in creating more products in the quantitative sense; if society, though, put more emphasis on the ability to empathize, how this can feed into communication, and how this could lead to productivity, then women would not be seen as weaker, but just different. (Of course, if a woman wants to train and be strong, she can be, but there should also be categories for women to define their own success that does not compare them to or attempt to equalize her with men because such valuation is relational, still implying marginalization.) By doing things like this, we can fight sexist prejudices, for less physical strength is not justification enough to assume that woman's existence is less than that of man. As Beauvoir says, "instead of trying to conceal those principles that are more or less explicitly implied, we would be better off stating them from the start" (16). Political correctness wishes to censor language to avoid the notion of differences, but because objective facts will always exist alongside the human experience, it is our job to reconsider them, not pretend that they are nonexistent.

Discourse is also necessary for the reexamination of stereotypes, and Allan Bloom, in *The Closing of the American Mind*, discusses how the American public has cultivated a trait he refers to as 'openness,' which political correctness serves as a tool to further, and how this trait has stunted the public's formation of valuable opinions and participation in diverse discourse. Such openness, in Bloom's opinion, is not progressive; rather, it is the openness of indifference, which stands in opposition to the kind that once invited us to test our knowledge and certitude through conversation that involved a manifold of meaningful opinions (Bloom, 41). Our objective, then, has become not offending others and having ideas that are essentially devoid of value. Political correctness can be seen as a mechanism that upholds this openness that Bloom

insults as it uses language to censor potentially discriminatory opinions; in essence, it skirts around the problem of prejudice, failing to address it directly and creating a kind of meaninglessness in thought that doesn't claim truth or belief. This is because political correctness acts as a form of censorship, and because it uses language to avoid offense, people will learn to avoid certain behavior, but they will never understand why they are avoiding that behavior in the first place. As such, offense might be circumvented, but people will no longer understand anything enough to believe in them or claim their beliefs as correct. Moreover, asserting that one's belief is right may lead to error for there are a lot of other viewpoints that exist; to claim a belief as true, then, seems erroneous, but simply believing in something does not imply the negation of other views. Because of this fear of error and negation, political correctness was formulated as a temporary solution to and distraction from real issues surrounding discrimination; it becomes, then, the avoidance of error – error that may be found in claiming one culture is better than other, in affirming that one belief is right and another wrong. Bloom says that this kind of mechanism “leaves nothing substantial enough... to resist criticism” (43). If we do not believe in certain ideas, whether they are misled or not, how will we be able to enter into conversation and learn to hold up our ideas against other arguments, reasons, and logic? Beliefs are important, then, because even if they are inaccurate, they equip us with the necessary opinions to converse, correct, and progress with our thoughts. Political correctness, though, censors errors that may arise in the process of believing. In 2011, a school in Seattle renamed its Easter eggs ‘spring spheres’ in an attempt avoid offense as they did not want to cause emotional harm to those who did not celebrate Easter (Olson, 15). In actuality, renaming them did not change the fact that they were still being used to celebrate Easter; instead, retaining the name ‘Easter eggs’ might have allowed people to be open to the holiday that is Easter, learn

more about it, and perhaps delve into other holidays that exist around this time of year as well. Referring to Easter eggs as 'spring spheres' gets rid of the culture associated with Easter, limiting the ability for people to express, participate in, and understand a set of beliefs. There seems to be a subtle, pro-Christian bias, though, in giving students specific events that only celebrate Easter, and a non-politically correct solution would be to allow all students to celebrate whatever holidays they want to celebrate, whether that be Easter, Ramadan, Yom Kippur, or anything else. This would spread knowledge regarding other cultures and ignite active participation with ideas outside of one's own; after all, Easter does not cease to exist simply through the renaming of eggs as 'spring spheres.' In conclusion, political correctness, limits openness; at most, it makes prejudices seem like they have disappeared, but in reality, the thoughts and understandings behind such prejudices will never be directly addressed as they are overshadowed by carefully constructed language that is meant to censor.

Inclusivity of thought, then, is held back by political correctness, and Iris Marion Young, in her work, *Inclusion and Democracy*, further emphasizes the importance of inclusion in the democratic process of reaching just policies and solutions. Young believes that inclusion is necessary in establishing an ideal deliberative democracy that incorporates all participants in discussion as it pools the largest amount of varying perspectives possible in order to increase a store of social knowledge in order to create a more holistic understanding of problems to effect more just solutions (Young, 11-14). Political correctness, though, obstructs this process as it censors certain language and behavior in order to eliminate notions of difference since these can lead to stereotypes and marginalization. Young and political correctness, then, have the same aims as Young also agrees that marginalization should be done away with, but her solution is the opposite of censorship; instead, she believes that such differences should be brought to light,

advocating for the discussion of the origination of social difference and how such differences, which are vital to free speech, must be shared in order to properly host democratic debate. She explains that social differences exist because of the varying groups that people associate themselves with; social identity, then, is relative (82) and each person's is different. Such differences will always exist, and it isn't necessarily possible to "transcend their particularity; instead, they must be expressed in order to understand the particularity of those situated differently [from ourselves] in the world" (113). By doing this, consolidation of the varying perspectives of *all* social positions can produce an encompassing social knowledge aimed at social change, meaning that even prejudice is necessary for a political debate to move towards justice. Political correctness, though, censors certain ideas from being expressed; for example, since the mid-1900s, the words "handicapped" and "disabled" have been replaced with "challenged" when describing those with mental and physical impediments in order to show that those with physical impediments are no lesser than those without them (Linton, 12), but this is not constructive. Though it does away with outward prejudices by focusing on safer language, people will use the word "challenged" without truly understanding why "disabled" or "handicapped" may be negative or derogatory. It would be much better to show our prejudices and not abide by political correctness because though discrimination is an issue that must be done away with, covering it up is not the solution; it must be shown directly so that it can be properly discussed, and opinions can be altered for the better. If we hear someone use the word "disabled" in a negative manner, then we can stop and correct them to let them know that a physical handicap, which can disable someone, does not necessarily make that person lesser. Error, prejudice, and conflict, then, are necessary for us to understand the terms and sources of

disagreement if they are to lead us to justice (Young, 43), but political correctness will never let those vital elements show, giving us no vessel that will actually dismantle discrimination.

Though Young emphasizes the importance of inclusivity regarding speech, she does outline a specific instance in which speech should be restricted, and this relates to withholding from use of language such as the ‘n-word,’ which I assert is a virtuous act that falls under the broad category of political correctness. Just because this one case may do good, though, does not mean that political correctness should be branded as a helpful category; most politically correct acts focus on correcting words that may arouse slight discomfort, but as I have argued, this kind of mindset hinders a true understanding of stereotypes that is needed to dismantle them. Speech that is oppressive and harmful, though, should be censored, and for Young, if such speech “relies on stereotypes and mere derision,” it means that one is implying that their opponents are “less than human” or that “their views do not deserve an equal hearing because of what they are” (48). By these standards, the ‘n-word’ should not be used because its history implies an incredibly derogatory stereotype; it originated as a means for white men to assert that African-Americans were lesser than humans, tools to be used only for profit. As such, this word found its roots in the marginalization of a group. Regarding the examples of political correctness I mentioned above, I would like to point out that the pronoun ‘he’ refers to a gender that exists without meaning or implication and the term ‘Easter’ refers to a celebrated holiday among many other holidays. These examples are politically correct because they did not undergo a long history that transformed them into something negative and derogatory; rather, these words existed as neutral in themselves, but with this new wave of Bloom’s notion of ‘openness’ and fear of error and offense, people deemed them as marginalizing in order to be safe and avoid discomfort, even though they are not necessarily discriminatory. On the other hand, the ‘n-word’ has an identity

that is inseparable from the connotation that a demographic of people is, as Young would say, 'less than human'; it was brought forth through racism and perpetuated discrimination. In fact, the 'n-word' need not be used at all when trying to identify a member of that specific group; there is plenty of other, non-racist language that does so. Censorship of the 'n-word,' then, is not only a means of being politically correct, but also an act that mitigates bigotry. Though I mentioned before that revealing prejudices is important for the process of correcting them, if a person is using the 'n-word,' there are probably using a lot of other politically incorrect behaviors and language that call for debate and correction, thereby offsetting the need for the 'n-word' to ever be said at all. Either way, the harm and marginalization placed on another person because of such a word is not worth it, and as such, the word is better off being censored.

In its totality, political correctness impairs the ability to acquire a more holistic knowledge, smothers the ability to reason, and obstructs the democratic process' attempts to reach the most just solutions possible. This is because it focuses on the redacting certain aspects of language and behavior in attempt to eliminate differences, but differences will *always* exist between individuals. In order to get rid of derisive stereotypes, we must understand these differences, vocalize our opinions regarding them, listen to the those of others, and enter into conversation so that an exchange of ideas can work to correct discriminatory notions when they arise. Only through this method can we understand the circumstances of others and where they come from, but political correctness acts almost as an adversary, seeking to put a wall between prejudice and real solutions. There are cases of politically correct action, though, that are virtuous, such as restricting use of the 'n-word' since it is unnecessary, racist, and oppressive, but simply because there are acts of political correctness that do good does not mean that political correctness in its own totality is something good. Instead, political correctness is a

mechanism that identifies potentially harmful or offensive language in an attempt to mitigate discomfort, but this censorship of misled biases actually restricts the ability to effect meaningful change. In order to fix the cracks in our reality, we must observe that such cracks exist, and political correctness, for the most part, hinders that process by babying us into believing in an indifferent utopia. As such, it is socially and politically dangerous, and other mechanisms of self-realization, the ability to debate, and the open-mindedness to change our opinions should replace what is known as political correctness so that true social justice can be achieved.

Works Cited

- Baron, Dennis E. "The Epicene Pronoun: The Word That Failed." *Duke University Press*. 1981: 83-97. *JSTOR*. Web. 17 Apr. 2019.
- Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Paris: Vintage Books, 1949. Print.
- Bloom, Allan. *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987. Print.
- Linton, Simi. *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York: NYU Press. 1998. Print.
- Olson, Kyle. *Indoctrination*. Bloomington: AuthorHouse, 2011. Print.
- Young, Iris Marion. *Inclusion and Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Print.