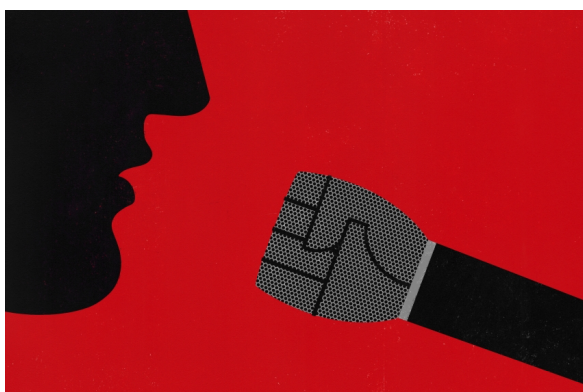


# Putting the Political Back in Politically Correct

## Everyone is mad. Is anyone right?

By Jonny Thakkar | June 12, 2019 ✓ PREMIUM



Jon Krause for The Chronicle

Debates about political correctness on college campuses can be extremely frustrating. On one side you have those, like *New York* magazine's Jonathan Chait, who claim to detect "a system of left-wing ideological repression" that operates both within the academy and beyond. On the other you have those, like Moira Weigel, in *The Guardian*, for whom "PC was a useful invention for the Republican right," "a phantom enemy" that allowed it to scare voters, rebrand racism, and defund universities. The gap between those views is so large that each side seems bound to accuse the other of bad faith — not least since

the one thing they agree on is that the future of higher education is at stake. In the face of such disagreement, the way forward is to take a step back. We must think philosophically — by defining terms, breaking down arguments, and interpreting others charitably while questioning ourselves.

A lot depends on what we mean by political correctness. Chait thinks of it as a whole "style of politics" that is intolerant of dissent and obsessed with identity. That analysis packs in too much, threatening to turn political correctness into a floating signifier whose real referent is "stuff that annoys me." Weigel offers a fascinating history of the term's origins within the left, where it was once used as a label for "excessive orthodoxy," but thinks people now use it to accuse others of "hiding the truth in order to advance an agenda or to signal moral superiority." That seems right as a general tendency — as Weigel points out, we never seem to hear people speaking of their own political correctness — but it is a mistake to confuse the social rules governing when we use a term with that term's actual meaning. We would not normally say of people that they are "sober now" unless they are often drunk, yet most people in the world are in fact sober now.

A definition that enables us to separate description from evaluation might run as follows: *Political correctness refers to the practice of regulating our speech in light of political ideals and values.* On this understanding, the claim that political correctness is a feature of contemporary academic life is perfectly compatible with the claim that its effects have been unfairly exaggerated. I would guess that a majority of academics hold both to be true. We are sufficiently habituated to regimenting our language that the freer formulations of certain nonacademics sometimes horrify or amuse us, but we don't consider ourselves oppressed by any kind of thought police

because we endorse most of the constraints on our expression. For those of us in this category, the real question is not *if* speech should ever be curtailed on campuses, but rather *when* it should be. How do we balance the good of free speech against other goods?

## A culture of thoroughgoing moralism tends also to be a culture of thoroughgoing hypocrisy.

Debates over free speech on campus are not about formal rights but rather about what we might call real freedom. We have the formal right to speak freely on a given topic whenever there is no law preventing our doing so. Countries differ on which protections they give to citizens — Holocaust denial is illegal in Germany, for instance — and routinely discriminate between citizens on the basis of their roles, as when the United

States denies military officers the right to speak contemptuously about senior politicians. But those who claim to have been silenced by political correctness typically have the legal right to say whatever it is they claim they cannot say. What they are really objecting to is the social pressure not to make use of that formal freedom — a pressure that, they argue, reduces their real freedom to express themselves.

That complaint is now associated with liberals like Chait, who are then accused by leftists of a performative self-contradiction: If you're publishing "in highly visible publications," Weigel asks, how have you been silenced? But historically speaking the distinction between formal and real freedom has typically been advanced by leftists against liberals, not the other way around — and real freedom has generally been understood as scalar, something you can have more or less of, rather than binary.

The leftist train of thought goes something like this: In principle we all have the right to publicly express our views; in practice it helps to own a newspaper. The more powerful you are, in other words, the more real will be your freedom. Bosses get to speak more than workers do, men more than women, whites more than blacks, and so on, both in the sense that they are more likely to have the floor to begin with and in the sense that they are less likely to suffer repercussions for what they say.

Whether knowingly or not, Chait and company are now making a similar argument regarding a culture that mandates political correctness. When we place social sanctions on one another for saying the wrong thing or using the wrong term, the objection goes, we create a negative-sum situation in which real freedom of speech is reduced for the powerful and powerless alike. For if our real freedom to pursue a course of action diminishes as its expected cost increases, call-out culture will reduce the real freedom of speech of any people who wonder if they might say the wrong thing or use the wrong term. Which is to say, in a period when social norms are changing rapidly, more or less everyone — with the worst hit being the least articulate and least educated.

**R**eal freedom of speech is always limited to some degree. Outside of therapy, there are no social contexts in which adults can say whatever is on their minds without repercussions. But the fact that every culture polices language to some extent does not imply that all cultures do so to the same extent. The most interesting question about political correctness is not therefore whether it exists or whether it should exist — the answer to both questions is "yes" — but rather *to what degree* it should exist. How should we balance real freedom of speech against other goods?

The canonical treatment of the value of free expression remains that of John Stuart Mill, who argued that each of our ideas must be "fully, frequently, and fearlessly discussed" on pain of being "held as a dead dogma, not as a living truth." To actively lead a life requires deciding what to believe and what to value. But you can know

whether you really believe what you think you believe only if you genuinely consider what alternative beliefs have going for them. As Mill put it, people who have never "thrown themselves into the mental position of those who think differently ... do not, in any proper sense of the word, know the doctrine which they themselves profess."

It is hard to throw ourselves into the mental position of those who think differently. We tend to caricature opposing views. What we need, then, is for people to explain and defend their own reasoning. That will happen only if they feel free to express their views. And that requires a society that avoids, as far as possible, "the peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion" and thereby protects "against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling, against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them."

Mill's argument is often cited by today's free-speech warriors. But their opponents — the ones they call social-justice warriors — hardly ever cite the philosopher who I believe makes the strongest case for their view: Plato. In the *Republic*, Socrates argues that the only way to create a healthy society is to regulate the cultural environment with an eye to generating the right kind of ethos. If citizens are virtuous, then rules and regulations won't be necessary; if they are vicious, then rules and regulations won't work. An ethos comes about not only as a result of formal schooling but also through our daily interactions. The stories we tell, the jokes we make, the words we choose, the objects we produce, the models we imitate — each of those plays a part in constituting a cultural environment that transmits an understanding of what is right and good, and each must therefore be scrutinized accordingly.

That is what leads Socrates to insist on his famous program of censorship. Stories that portray the gods as capricious, he says, must be banned — out with Homer, then, despite his standing as the greatest of the ancient Greek poets. Those notorious strictures are just the beginning. Socrates goes on to imply that *any* activity that affects the cultural environment must be supervised with an eye to ethical and political criteria: painters, weavers, embroiderers, architects, and even the manufacturers of furniture must not "represent — whether in pictures, buildings, or any other works — a character that is vicious, unrestrained, slavish, and graceless." Not only that, but linguistic practices must also be watched over to ensure that citizens develop the right ideals. They should have correct "usages regarding beautiful, just, or good things." They should, for instance, call their leaders "preservers" rather than "masters" or "rulers." They should call conflict with other Greek states "discord" rather than "war." They should call something "ridiculous" only if rational argument has shown it to be bad.

Plato's ideal society is authoritarian and undemocratic: The cultural environment is to be regulated by an expert elite, with the lower orders having no say. But we can imagine a liberal-democratic version of Platonism in which all citizens are charged with stewarding the cultural environment by means of their own daily actions — setting an example for others but also calling them out for their failings. Socrates himself offers a model for that when he issues what must surely be the first demand for political correctness in academic history. When Glaucon says that in constructing his ideal city Socrates has "produced ruling men that are completely beautiful," Socrates calls him out: "And ruling women, too, Glaucon, for you mustn't think that what I've said applies any more to men than it does to women."

What are we to make of the Platonic ideal of a society in which all cultural production, from the most elevated work of art to the most ordinary conversation, is ethically and politically salutary? We might be attracted by the underlying logic: If we're shaped by our culture, and our culture is generated by a complex web of individual

actions, then progress will depend on the character of those actions — the personal is political. On the other hand, we might be repelled by the lack of playfulness and spontaneity in a society where art and sport, tragedy and comedy, furniture and embroidery must all answer to ethical and political demands. In the liberal-democratic version of Platonism, these demands would be imposed horizontally rather than vertically: citizen-to-citizen rather than ruler-to-subject. Yet that makes the social pressure only more intense, since even intimate spaces would offer no respite from citizenly obligation. Perhaps friends *should* let friends say inappropriate things? At any rate, a culture of thoroughgoing moralism tends also to be a culture of thoroughgoing hypocrisy.

**I**f this is the price of building a better world, it might be worth paying. But if political correctness is the practice of regulating our speech in light of political ideals and values, a lot will hang on whether those values are the right ones — after all, fascists have their own culture of political correctness. Plato was right, then, that those who seek to shape the culture in line with their ideals also have a responsibility to reflect on whether those ideals are actually justified.

In Plato's own vision, ordinary citizens are not to be trusted to engage in such reflection. If we are to shape our culture together as equals, by contrast, we must *all* be willing to ask what we should value and why. That requires debate, but it also requires humility. This might be especially true right now: Given how rapidly social norms have already changed within our lifetimes, how can we be sure that today's certainty won't become tomorrow's anathema?

It turns out, then, that those who take themselves to be fighting for ethical and political progress ought to be fostering a culture in which critics feel free to challenge their beliefs and ideals. And since that would be an environment in which people can express themselves without fear of being punished for saying the wrong thing, it follows that those who call others out prematurely or ungenerously ought themselves to be called out. They are standing in the way of progress. In rebuking them we would not be lamenting PC culture but rather seeking to improve it. Let the scolds be scolded, and let justice roll down like waters.

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