

Political correctness in a global age: The ethical implications of a hegemonic discourse

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## **ABSTRACT**

The concept of political correctness, or more accurately, anti-political correctness has re-emerged in the last decade as a major interpretive framework in the media. Populist politicians such as Trump in the US and Farage (a key advocate of Brexit) and Johnson in the UK for example routinely draw upon a discourse featuring political correctness as a *bete noire*. I adopt a Foucauldian analysis to argue in this paper that such an anti-political correctness discourse has become hegemonic and is frequently routinely reproduced by journalists. This paper critically examines the arguments mounted by critics of political correctness and argues that they are not only flawed but that they also constitute an ideology which delegitimises an agenda concerned to promote equality, diversity and inclusion.

### **The meaning of political correctness**

We are continually being reminded that we live in a world where political correctness is pervasive. And yet the concept itself remains unclear and indeed contested. A few writers embrace the term to signal their belief in the importance of being inclusive, especially in language, and their concern to redress the disadvantages faced by minority groups: ‘PC fosters civility between diverse humans and...at its best, is sensitivity to the feelings and needs of others’ (Alibhai-Brown 2018: 11,21). More commonly, however, the term is used in a disparaging way to mock what is seen as a ludicrous attempt to avoid the real issues (see Ridler below) or warn us of the dangerous new culture threatening free speech and plain honest speaking (see Hitchens below). In the process a contrast is often drawn between political correctness and commonsense: ‘Voters seek return to common sense in revolt against political correctness’ announces a headline in one broadsheet (Shipman 2020),

Political correctness does not address the real problem faced by ethnic minorities, says head of the National Black Police Association...Andrew Gaye, an inspector with the Police Service of Northern Ireland told the Sunday telegraph that this sensitivity may have gone “too far in some stages” such as leaving people unable to call a black coffee black coffee (Ridler 2020).

I fear anyone who dissents from today’s pervasive culture of political correctness will be visited by the Thought Police...so how long until anyone who writes an article like this is dragged away in handcuffs (Hitchens 2020).

In 2017 Trevor Phillips, the first Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission, presented a documentary on British television entitled, ‘Has political correctness gone mad?’. This question is commonly asked and answered in the affirmative (as in Bond 2018). I shall restrict myself here to two examples where this common refrain is evident: the lampooning of an analysis of a children’s book (Brown 2019) and the response of a supermarket to a complaint (Young 2019).

World's gone PC mad...Snowflakes: Mr Clever is a sexist...Flakes have slammed "sexist" Mr Men character Mr Clever for "mansplaining" an iconic bridge to "stupid" blonde Little Miss Curious (Brown 2019).

Waitrose has apologized for selling "racist" chocolate easter ducklings after it received complaints that the dark one was named "ugly"...Many Twitter users have reacted angrily to the supermarket's decision to remove the chocolate ducklings suggesting it has given in to excessive political correctness. PC gone mad...yet again one person wrote (Young 2019)

These two examples clearly ridicule and belittle political correctness but the invocation of the common refrain, PC gone mad also in a sense brings the positive and negative usages of the concept together. A narrative is constructed which suggests that at one stage PC was indeed progressive in promoting social justice for minorities but that it has gone too far so that now 'people are becoming frightened of saying the wrong thing, using the wrong language about a pretty wide range of opinion' (Parris 2019). This view is widely shared: 'The progressive movement, that has done so much to tackle inequality and unfairness, has been captured by ultras who demand absolute conformity with every article of their faith' (Phillips 2020a). Another journalist, further right on the political spectrum, concurs. The decline of religion and subsequently secular ideologies has left a vacuum which has been filled by social justice zealots. Failing to acknowledge the success of previous human rights campaigns in righting historical injustices relating to race, gender and sexuality, new theories emerged 'to suggest that things had never been worse. Suddenly - after most of us had hope it had become a non-issue – everything seemed to have become about race' (Murray 2020: 6). A crusading desire to right perceived wrongs has entailed the creation of 'a set of tripwires laid across the culture...What everyone does know are the things that people will be called if their foot ever nicks against these freshly laid tripwires. "Bigot", "homophobe", "sexist", "mysognist", "racist" and "transphobe" are just for starters' (Murray 2020: 7).

There is little doubt that political correctness now typically carries negative connotations. Few people consequently identify themselves as supportive of PC and when they do, they sound on the defensive (Johnson 2017; Alibhai-Brown 2018). More typically, those who are sympathetic to the causes associated with PC will studiously avoid defining themselves as advocates of PC. The same is also true of a related concept, 'woke' which, though initially coined to refer to awareness of racial injustice 'has been weaponised, used in conservative media circles as an insult' (Hunt 2020; Hirsch 2019). Two examples will suffice: 'The woke left is the new Ministry of Truth...Good people are silenced in an Orwellian nightmare where a tyrannical minority decide what we're allowed to say (Turner 2020). And 'The march of wokeism is an all-pervasive new oppression' (Phillips, 2020b).

Both political correctness and woke are rarely defined. Instead they are used to depict the Other in a disparaging way and often to suggest that there are powerful forces suppressing inconvenient truths and steadily eroding our freedom. One journalist claims that 'the thought police are spiralling out of control' (Street-Porter 2020), while another believes that we need to wake up before it's too late: 'We've become a timid, mute, fearful society in which everyone must walk on constant eggshells for fear that they will be next for the social media pile-on and politically

correct execution' (Morgan 2020: 327). This characterization of PC and woke is highly influential and clearly resonates with many people. A 2018 YouGov poll found that nearly half the respondents believe that "there are many important issues these days when people are simply not allowed to say what they think", 13 points more than the 35 per cent who believe people are generally "free to discuss what they think". In addition, 'by two to one - 67 per cent to 33 per cent – Britons believe "too many people are too easily offended these days over the language that others use" as against the view that care with language is needed "to avoid offending people with different backgrounds"' (Clark 2018). A 2020 CSS poll presents a broadly similar picture, with 'six in ten' agreeing 'that political correctness gives "too much power to a small minority of people who like to take offence" and nearly eight in ten agreeing 'that "you have to walk on eggshells when speaking about certain issues these days" and over eight in ten agreeing 'that "too many people are easily offended these days"' (Shipman, 2020). The media in short portray political correctness in a derogatory fashion and most people buy this picture.

### **Origins of political correctness**

The term political correctness, unlike woke, has a long history. While there is general agreement that it originated in left wing circles, 'an important historical shift seems to have occurred in the 1980s when the term increasingly came to be used by the political right, particularly in the US...to denigrate left wing political opponents' (Lea 2009: 11; 74). An influential article in the New York Times entitled 'The rising hegemony of the Politically Correct' (Bernstein 1990) popularized the term and set in train a wave of stories about the threats posed to universities by cultural relativism, challenges to the canon and changing admissions policies. Such stories drew upon and reinforced a series of critiques mounted by conservative writers who espoused an avowedly elitist position in defence of high culture and criticized multiculturalism as a threat to Western civilization. The philosopher, Allan Bloom was the first out of the tracks with his book, 'The closing of the American mind' (Bloom 1987) but he was quickly followed by other critics (Kimball 1990; D'Sousa 1991). 'Decrying the influence of the campus left', these writers were scathing about what they saw as its censoriousness, in the process enabling conservatives, 'traditional supporters of censorship...to present themselves' anew 'as opponents of censorship' and in favour of free speech (Sparrow, 2017). They attacked what they saw as the politicization of higher education, but they were themselves just as political as their liberal opponents, with their work 'funded by networks of conservative donors' (Weigel 2016).

The term crossed the Atlantic in the early 1990s, carrying with it similar negative connotations. As the first book addressing the debate put it: 'PC is a dirty word in modern Britain. To call someone PC is less a description than an insult carrying with it accusations of everything from Stalinism/McCarthyism to (even worse?) having no sense of humour' (Dunant 1994; vii). What paved the way for the campaign against political correctness in the UK in the 1990s was not, however, as in the US a critique of higher education but rather a campaign mounted by the right wing press against the Labour Party, 'popularly referred to as *Loony Leftism* at the time' (Lea 2009:158)

The contemporary derogatory meaning of political correctness goes back to this period. While some people have subsequently tried to put a positive gloss on the concept and reclaim it, this

has not been successful (Ackroyd & Pilkington 2007). The upshot is that those who continue to ‘embrace the causes most often associated with the term -the use of enlightened language; the promotion of multicultural forms of curriculum; and forms of affirmative action’ - typically feel ‘that they should avoid it and distance their behaviour from its connotations’ (Lea 2009: 8).

### **Political correctness in a digital age**

While concern with political correctness has ebbed and flowed, there is little doubt that in the last decade it has again become a critical concept in the rightist lexicon. Universities continue to be seen as posing a central threat in the US and, with the expansion of higher education in recent decades, universities in the UK also have received renewed attention, increasingly being characterized, along with their American counterparts, as controlled by a liberal elite and pervaded by political correctness. The ideas that inform social justice zealots and thus underpin PC have their roots within the humanities and social science departments of universities, it is argued, and these ideas are dangerous. Thus, despite the radical reduction of social injustice, the theories and texts (purportedly) pervading the academy ‘express with absolute certainty, that all white people are racist, all men are sexist...seeking’ in this way ‘to divide humans into marginalized identity groups and their oppressors’, fueling tribalism and threatening to reverse the manifest progress made in reducing incidents of racism, sexism and homophobia (Pluckrose & Lindsay 2020: 183; 258). In the absence of serious issues relating to race, gender and sexuality, attention is paid to trivial matters: ‘Cambridge University set new standards of political correctness this week with its announcement of an inquiry into the way it benefitted from the slave trade’ (Biggar 2019), an inquiry lampooned by another critic as ‘virtue signaling on steroids’ (Lyons & Yorke 2019).

Despite continuities in perceptions of the threat posed by PC, the rediscovery of political correctness in the last decade takes a somewhat different form from that predominant in the 1990s and early 2000s. The distinctiveness of PC in its modern guise is twofold: a belief that freedom of speech, which should be absolute, is under grave threat, and a belief that younger generations (notably millennials, and especially their successors, generation z, the internet generation) are fragile “snowflakes” and keen to be protected from offensive speech (Symons 2018).

The threat to free speech is deemed so severe that in the UK a Free Speech Union has recently been created which sets out its manifesto in the following terms: ‘Free speech is the bulwark on which all our other freedoms rest, yet it is currently in greater peril than at any time since the second world war’ (Dabhoiwala, 2020). This verdict is shared by the two most prominent proponents of absolute free speech in North America, notably Jordan Peterson and Niall Ferguson. Peterson, who came to prominence for his vehement opposition to a change in Canadian anti-discrimination legislation obliging people to refer to transgender people by their preferred pronoun, contends that legislation on hate crime threatens freedom of speech (Fry, Peterson, Dyson & Goldberg, 2018). Ferguson concurs and in a series of interventions is highly critical of social media companies regulating access, a development which he argues puts free speech at peril (Ferguson 2019b). In the UK an internet magazine, Spiked (see Monbiot 2018) and an influential conservative think tank, Civitas have taken up the cudgels in promoting

libertarianism, highlighting what they see as the dangers to freedom of speech of a culture of victimhood (Green 2019) and harassment policies in universities (Civitas 2000). Hate crime laws and the equality legislation should in its view be abolished and legislation passed instead to establish an absolute right to free speech. The latter is crucial since it is only when people are not censored and are able to speak freely in the public sphere that ‘the marketplace of ideas’ works effectively to enable truth and superior ideas to win out, and falsehoods and inferior ideas to wither on the vine.

Alongside the belief that free speech is in peril is the belief that younger generations are, as a result of being brought up in a safety-first culture, very fragile and demand to be protected from ideas that they find offensive. Claire Fox is often credited with being the first person to talk of ‘Generation Snowflake’: ‘Barely a week goes by without reports of something “offensive” being banned from campus...this all-pervading sense of grievance, displayed by so many students, is now beginning to cause serious anguish for older commentators, who look on with horror at the increasing evidence that young people have become dangerously thin-skinned’ (Fox 2016: xvii). This conceptualization of millennials and generation z has taken off, with the US attorney general, for example describing students as increasingly ‘sanctimonious, sensitive, supercilious snowflakes’ and their campuses as an ‘echo chamber of political correctness and homogeneous thought, a shelter for fragile egos’ (Sessions quoted in Malik 2019a: 67).

The most influential proponents of this view are Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt in a book entitled ‘The coddling of the American mind’, a title echoing Bloom’s 1987 best seller and like its predecessor an account of what is going wrong in universities. The authors argue that the internet generation who first went to university in 2013 has been brought up in a safety-first culture. Overprotected and brought up without experiencing free play, these young people often lack the resilience of previous generations and indeed experience more anxiety when they arrive at university. ‘Requests for safe spaces and trigger warnings’ along with ‘the “disinvitation” of guest speakers’ spread because of the prevalence of the ‘idea that college students should not be exposed to “offensive” ideas’ (Lukianoff & Haidt 2018:31; 47-8). The response of college authorities ‘to protect students by creating bureaucratic means of resolving problems’ reinforces the safety-first culture (Lukianoff & Haidt 2018: 212). In this culture a belief that ‘straight white males’ comprise ‘the main axis of oppression’ spreads along with ‘the development of a “call out culture” and a corresponding sense among students that they are walking on eggshells, afraid of saying the wrong thing...out of fear that that they themselves will be called out by a mob on social media’ (Lukianoff & Haidt 2018: 70-2). A similar picture of universities has been presented in the UK. The current generation of students has been brought up in an overprotective way where safety is paramount and emotional security takes precedence over other values. This process of socialization is inimical to resilience with the result that students now are less grown up than those in the past when they go to university and do not expect to be challenged. Emotions have in the process become weaponized, with students increasingly being unwilling to be open to new ideas; feeling offended has taken the place of disagreement. The response of universities in a context where students are seen as customers has been paternalistic with the result that freedom has become trumped by a concern to promote diversity, safety and not give offence (Furedi 2016).

The free speech crisis exacerbated by the advent of the snowflake generation entails, according to those critical of PC, cancel culture, a modern form of ostracism whereby people who speak out against fashionable left wing positions are abused online and may even lose their jobs. Peterson and Ferguson take this line and are adamant that it is the left, or ‘political correctness types’ as Peterson puts it (Buncombe 2019), who comprise the main threat and that conservatives are their targets. ‘In every case the pattern is the same. An academic deemed to be conservative gets “called out” by a leftist group or rag. The Twitter mob piles in. Mindless mainstream media outlets amplify the story. The relevant authorities capitulate’ (Ferguson, 2019a).

While the latest iteration of the political correctness gone mad refrain has distinctive features, we must not exaggerate its novelty. Here is President George Bush in 1991 on PC and free speech: ‘The notion of political correctness has ignited controversy across the land. And although the movement arises from the laudable desire to sweep away the debris of racism and sexism and hatred, it replaces old prejudice with new ones... It declares certain topics off limits, certain expressions off limits, even certain gestures off limits. What began as a crusade for civility has soured into a cause of conflict and even censorship’ (Bush quoted in Malik 2019a: 61-2; and Alibhai-Brown 2018: 30). And here is another critic in 1992 on PC and current students: ‘We are miseducating a generation of students to run to Daddy Dean and Mummy President for paternalistic protection when someone offends them’ (Dershowitz quoted in Lea 2009: 165).

Nonetheless, the belief that free speech is in peril and that generation snowflake is intolerant, entailing the advent of a dangerous cancel culture, has given the attacks on PC renewed venom. The critics share a disgust with identity politics by which they mean movements foregrounding identities based on ethnicity, gender and sexuality. The focus on these identities, it is claimed, divides people unnecessarily and encourages tribalism. An individualistic perspective is preferred instead, with some of the key players even espousing self-help manuals (Peterson) and cognitive therapy (Lukianoff & Haidt). Many of the most prominent figures are on the right of the political spectrum (Peterson, Ferguson and Murray for example) but there are also people who identify themselves as further left on the political spectrum (Haidt, Fox, Furedi, Pluckrose and Morgan for example) who share the same concerns and believe that many of those purportedly promoting social justice have imbibed a new religion (informed by postmodernism and/or Marxism) which is illiberal, entails ‘virtue signalling’, threatens free speech and is antithetical to reasoned debate. While there is an acknowledgement that societies face threats from the right as well as the left, the focus for PC critics is on the threat from the left arising from social justice warriors.

### **Contesting contemporary critics of PC**

I shall address below each of the claims mounted by PC critics in turn: the arguments relating to freedom of speech; the arguments relating to university students; and the claims relating to cancel culture.

#### **Free speech under threat?**

Free speech is indeed vital. There is a strong liberal case, following John Stuart Mill (2010), to tolerate speech even when it is offensive, but there is an important caveat. For Mill, we also

need to take account of the harm principle and curb speech when it directly entails violence to others. In other words, we should not support absolute freedom of speech. Indeed, to do so would be contradictory since absolute free speech would drown out the right of each of us to free speech. Even the US first amendment, which prevents hate speech laws found in other democracies, does not support absolute free speech and ‘has not protected, for example, libel, slander, perjury, false advertising, obscenity and profanity, solicitation of a crime, or “fighting” words’ (Malik, 2019a: 107). The right to free speech is an important principle but principles may collide, for example the right to freedom of speech and the right to life and we may be forced to choose between them (Monbiot 2021). The prohibition against shouting fire in a crowded theatre is uncontroversial; the suppression of misinformation about vaccines in a pandemic is more contentious.

Free debate is also vital, a sine qua non of a healthy democracy and critical for scientific progress and the development of innovative new technologies. The notion that the arena for debate comprises a marketplace of ideas is, however, misleading because in practice ‘the market is skewed and not all ideas receive equal representation’ (Malik 2019a: 112). Oligopolies such as Fox Corporation hold sway and the voices of white middle class men tend to be privileged. Given this, it is somewhat obfuscatory to dismiss a perspective which acknowledges group affiliations and power differences in favour of a wholly individualistic approach.

It is distinctly odd to argue that there is a free speech crisis since the rise of digital platforms means that ‘speech has never been freer than it is today, including speech that is hostile, emotional and potentially extreme. The traditional barriers and gatekeepers that used to restrict access to the public sphere and intellectual canon are losing power’ (Davies 2018). The result is that a wider range of voices can be heard. The sense that there is a crisis is partly explicable in terms of shifting cultural norms (Why can’t I use the N word or talk of picaninnies?). It partly reflects a sense of grievance by cultural elites that they are losing authority and are increasingly being challenged, sometimes in an abusive way; the moral panic over free speech on this reading is a conservative response to ‘this messier less predictable world’ and an attempt ‘to restore a traditional cultural order’ (Davies 2018). And it partly conflates the right to speak with the right to speak with impunity. It is perfectly legitimate, for example, to protest against hate speech and to brand this as “silencing” is itself an assault on free expression (Malik, 2019a: 107).

The outrage at infringements to free speech, in pointing to PC gone mad, is highly selective. The British government’s Prevent strategy entails a legal obligation on universities to prevent people being drawn into terrorism. Guidelines stipulate the need to vet external speakers and this does have ‘serious consequences for freedom of speech (Tittley 2020: 73)). And yet this and other cases which challenge freedom of speech, such as the banning of materials from anti-capitalist groups in schools, tend to be overlooked. The same was true of the BBC ruling (later rescinded by the Director General) that Naga Munchetty had broken the corporation’s guidelines in her response to President Trump’s tweet that four congresswomen (all people of colour) ‘should go back to the totally broken and crime-infested places from which they came’. Munchetty speaking from her own experience of being told ‘as a woman of colour, to go back to where I came from’ commented that this phrase was racist and that she well understood why people would be furious

with Trump. This comment was deemed to have transgressed the principle of impartiality (Hirsch et al 2019). While this judgement is highly problematic and later was recognized as such by the Director General, the point I wish to make here is that the case was not taken up as an example of PC gone mad.

The case I wish to turn to now was taken up as an example and is illustrative of a general point: ‘the right to express racist ideas... is increasingly marked out as what is most at stake in relation to freedom of speech’ (Titley 2020: 11) so that ‘calling out’ racism is summarily dismissed as PC gone mad. Take for example the cartoon of Serena Williams published in an Australian newspaper. Many saw the cartoon as an example of ‘glaring bigotry’, but the newspaper dismissed this reaction as “PC BS”, with the critics labelled as “oversensitive”. In an editorial the following day, ‘the paper blamed the “social media hordes” for attempting ‘to defeat cartooning – and satire – with a politically correct barrage. It also published the cartoon again on the front page...with the headline “Welcome to PC World”, a label “Satire free zone” and the words: “If the self-appointed censors...get their way on this Serena Williams cartoon, our new politically correct life will be very dull indeed”. And so it is that we once again enter the culture wars...with aggressors posing as victims, bigotry masquerading as satire, free speech condemned as censorship, and any calls for sensitivity, historical context, moral responsibility, equality, accuracy, decency, fairness or accountability dismissed as “political correctness”’ (Younge 2018).

There is widespread agreement that digital platforms are increasingly significant and that they raise issues that did not arise with old media. They are not seen as publishers and therefore are not subject to the same regulations. This means that dangerous misinformation can spread like wildfire and online abuse can go viral. The latter can be, at least partially, addressed when it constitutes criminal behaviour such as threats to kill, but the former is currently a more intractable problem. Facebook, Google and Twitter recognize that there is an issue and employ content moderators, but it is questionable whether companies ‘as big and ubiquitous’ as these should have such power to censor what is objectionable (Ferguson 2019b). What seems incontrovertible is that some kind of regulation of big tech is needed to allow any possibility for a public sphere where there can be reasoned debate between diverse views (Monbiot 2021: D’Ancona 2017).

### **Universities in crisis?**

I shall now turn to the claims mounted by PC critics in relation to university students. The first point to make is that it is not unusual for an older generation to hanker back to a golden age – typically twenty years earlier – when young people behaved appropriately and civility flourished (Pearson 1983). That is exactly what is going on when reference is made to the snowflake generation. Despite the congruence in the picture of young people presented by PC critics, much of the evidence is anecdotal. The authors of the book which has been most influential in conceptualizing young people in this way acknowledge themselves that ‘most students are not fragile, they are not “snowflakes” and they are not afraid of ideas’ (Lukianoff & Haidt 2019: 268). This is borne out by a YouGov survey in 2018 which does not point to greater ‘sensitivity’



or disbelief in the value of ‘free speech’ among young people or students compared to ‘the general population’ (Murray 2018-19: 46-7).

As for what is happening in universities, the claims by Spiked and Civitas that campus censorship is rife are deeply misleading. Upon closer analysis, the scores produced suggesting that the situation is so bad that it requires legislation arise from collating a wide range of disparate variables including ‘human resources policies and codes of conduct, of a sort now standard in most large organisations and often required by law’ (Malik 2019a: 119). These policies and codes of conduct turn out to be the main examples of censorship identified in universities. The purported campus censorship is thus an artefact which stems from a belief in absolute free speech and antipathy to the ‘cumbersome legal obligations’ exemplified by the Equality Act, which entail a need to balance the duty to promote freedom of speech with other obligations (Civitas, 2020: 20). There is little evidence in fact that academic freedom is under threat (Watkins, 2020). On the contrary, BBC reality check ‘found that since 2010 there had been: seven student complaints about course content being in some way offensive or inappropriate – four have resulted in action being taken; six occasions on which universities cancelled speakers as a result of complaints and no instances of books being banned or removed. We picked these measures as ones that would reveal restrictions at an institutional level regarding what students are learning. And of the 136 universities and more than two million higher education students in the UK, the number of incidents is small’ (Schraer & Butcher 2018). A Parliamentary cross-party investigation in the same year came to a similar judgement: ‘press accounts of widespread suppression of free speech are clearly out of kilter with reality’ (Tittley 2020: 80). Despite this, the government are introducing new measures to strengthen free speech at universities, even creating a role called “Free speech and academic freedom champion” (Oluwole, 2021).

“Safe spaces”, “trigger warnings” and “no-platforming”...have been heralded as proof that we are educating a new generation of “snowflake” students’ and comprise the main indicators of a safety-first culture. In fact, both the policies relating to safe spaces and trigger warnings ‘are aimed at being as inclusive as possible and allowing as many people as possible to participate in conversations. Trigger warnings...do not stop anybody from being allowed to say anything; rather they help people who might be affected negatively by that speech to prepare themselves or choose not to expose themselves to that material. Safe spaces prevent people from speaking about a topic in a particular setting, but they do not prevent people from having these conversations in other places, and they only exclude people in order to better enable vulnerable groups to speak freely’ (Riley 2021: 10). Unlike safe spaces and trigger warnings, no-platforming, a policy which entails refusing to provide a platform for a speaker because of their views or affiliations, is not new, with the National Union of Students having had such a policy since 1973. It should be noted that ‘the fundamental act of not inviting a speaker is not itself an assault on free speech’ (Riley 2021: 11). Only six organisations known to hold racist or fascist views are currently proscribed: ‘three of these groups promote Islamic extremism, while the other three promote far right English nationalism and fascism’. What is more, ‘no platforming has been used very sparingly: ‘there were only twelve institutions that banned controversial

speakers or events in the 2014-17 period, according to the free speech absolutists, Spiked Online' (Santivanez in Riley 2021: 213-4)).

Safe spaces, trigger warnings and no-platforming are exceptional. Far from threatening free speech, safe spaces and trigger warnings enhance it. No-platforming by contrast does not. Nonetheless there is a case for exceptionally refusing a platform to a speaker. 'The mission of the university includes discriminating between ideas on the basis of disciplinary norms and intellectual expertise, and foregrounding some ideas while actively neglecting those which have been discredited and disproven' (Titley2020: 124-5). There are, however, some ideas that are not only obsolete...but also undermine the university's functioning' (Baer 2019: 41). One such idea is the supremacy of the white race, which 'does not merit debate on campus...By positing that some human beings are inherently inferior to others, white supremacists and virulent racists materially undermine the equal conditions of participation for certain students...The point is not about students feeling safe, welcome, and not offended, but it is a matter of all students, regardless of their group belonging, having the equal right to participate' (Baer 2019: 42; 46). We need to distinguish freedom of speech and academic freedom. The right to free speech means that white supremacist and racists should not be banned from a public space such as a street, but academic freedom demands that they are banned from the university 'since they undermine the very purpose of education, which depends on the equal participation of all members of the community regardless of background and race' (Baer 2019: 69). Academic freedom in short does not demand the freedom to debate discredited ideas, but it does demand that everyone can participate in debate on equal terms. No-platforming is justified therefore in exceptional circumstances.

In addition to safe spaces, trigger warnings and no-platforming, PC critics have pointed to two other phenomena which are seen as threats to free speech, namely witch hunts of staff, on the one hand, and, intimidation and violence on campus, on the other hand. According to Lukianoff and Haidt, the first has been evident since 2015, while the latter has developed since 2017. These phenomena are clearly disturbing, but they are exceptional. It is revealing that a very limited number of examples are rehashed, with Lukianoff & Haidt and Murray for example identifying the same three witch hunts to illustrate their argument. Both phenomena arguably are more indicative of a deeply polarized society than an overprotective upbringing. What is noteworthy here are increased provocation from far right groups' emboldened by the advent of Trump as President and growing anger felt by students 'since by 2015 most people had seen videos of police officers shooting or choking unarmed black men' (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019: 97; 103)

It is interesting to explore the implications of conceptualizing universities as riven by an assault on free speech by snowflakes for racial inequality. There is now a considerable literature pointing to the persistence of racial inequality in the academy (Arday & Mirza, 2019; Pilkington, 2020). While PC critics differ in their approach, there is a tendency for them to be sceptical about such evidence. Since, in their view, the battle for race equality has been virtually won, the question arises as to why race has resurfaced as an issue. One reason put forward is that young people, or at least snowflakes, have adopted 'a new religion of social justice' and interpret the world through this lens ((Murray, 2020: 245). It 'assumes racism is everywhere' and because

there has in fact been ‘a radical reduction of social injustice...deeper and deeper readings of situations and texts and increasingly complicated Theoretical arguments have been required to detect them’ (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020: 132; 211). Interpreting the world in the most negative light ie catastrophizing results. Unintentional slights for example are interpreted as microaggressions, ‘fostering feelings of victimization, and anger and hopelessness in...students’ who ‘will come to see the world - and even their university - as a hostile place where things never seem to get better (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019: 46). While they are careful not to claim that we live in a post racial society, PC critics believe that new religion of social justice exaggerates the problem. It’s not surprising therefore that they are so critical of many of the measures proposed to promote race equality. Some wish to see the Equality Act repealed since the legal obligations, including harassment policies, that threaten freedom of speech (Civitas, 2020). Others believe that equality and diversity officers ‘wield’ far too much ‘institutional, social, and cultural power’ and challenge the requirements to sign up to any ‘statement of diversity, equality and inclusion, or mandatory diversity or equality training’ (Pluckrose & Lindsay, 2020: 216; 264). And others are insistent that any ‘social justice activism’ should be resolutely liberal ie concerned only with fair procedures and not fair outcomes (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2019: 231). Clearly those who frame the crisis on campus as racism rather than free speech would take a markedly different approach (Malik, 2019b).

### **Cancel culture as a problem?**

While the claim that free speech is in peril and the contention that generation snowflake exacerbates the danger are found to be wanting, the same is not true of cancel culture. There does indeed exist a modern form of ostracism which can entail online abuse, public shaming and in extreme cases the loss of a job. It is important nonetheless to qualify the view of cancel culture presented by PC critics.

Cancelling itself is not a new phenomenon but social media have eroded the distinction between private and public space so that cancelling can go viral. Goldberg puts it well: ‘We all live now in this terrible crowd sourced panopticon that makes you worry that any straight phrase you utter might be used to defame you’ (Fry et al, 2018: 92). There is little doubt that panic at the fear of denunciation is common which is why 152 writers of different ideological persuasions in 2020 signed a letter to Harper’s decrying the stifling of debate. Public shaming can be based on slip-ups or errors that in a predigital age would probably have been forgotten over time, but ‘today, people may be followed by their doppelganger wherever they go in the world’ (Murray, 2020: 179).

At the same time, we should recognize that the alleged cancellers include marginalized voices who would not otherwise be heard (Malik 2020a). It is helpful in this context to distinguish our response to individuals and their beliefs. We may not be able to respect certain ideas and indeed even find them repellant, but we can tolerate them. When it comes to people, however, respect should be the order of the day. Some trans activists fundamentally disagree with some feminists, but that should not entail dismissing the latter as transphobes. Malik puts it well; ‘A moral right to express unpopular opinions is not a moral right to express those opinions in a way that silences the voices of others, or puts them in danger’ (Malik, 2019a:133).

We should know that cancelling does not mean silencing. Indeed many of the well-known writers on the right, such as Jordan Peterson and Toby Young, who have been ‘cancelled’ use newspaper columns, television appearances and online media to complain about being cancelled (Foster, 2019) and in this way garner more publicity (Titley, 2020). They present themselves as victims but have certainly not been silenced. And in fact it is extremely rare, at least in the UK for individuals to lose their job as a result of being cancelled (Lawson, 2020).

Ironically, cancel culture which is often equated with PC (Malik 2020c), has been blamed for making the most famous advocate of absolute free speech and scourge of snowflakes a victim, and this despite the fact that it is usually the left who are pilloried for sanctifying victimhood.

Martyr for free speech Jordan Peterson is the professor vilified by the left for his crusade against political correctness. Now he is seriously ill his close friend Douglas Murray reveals the very high price he’s paid.

Peterson has bravely battled the political correctness ninjas harder than anyone else. In an age of newly imposed, often suffocating dogmas, he said what people know to be true about a whole range of issues...But there was a very great cost to pay for being the cause celebre of telling the truth. Becoming Public Enemy No 1 may have helped lead him to where he is today...in intensive care in Russia following a dependence on anti- anxiety pills (Murray 2020a).

Contrary to the view propagated by PC critics, cancel culture is by no means a purely left-wing phenomenon. “Cancel culture” exists, fuelled by political intolerance and the toxic anonymity of social media. The great myth about cancel culture...is that it exists only on the left. For the past 40 years, rightwing newspapers have ceaselessly fought to delegitimize and ultimately cancel our national broadcaster...Likewise, recent attacks on museums, universities and the National Trust were launched...to intimidate other institutions and encourage them to cancel projects they might have been considering: to investigate their own historical links to parts of Britain’s past that our leaders and much of our press feel should be jettisoned or left unexamined’, in particular our historical role in colonialism and slavery (Olusoga, 2021). Right-wing cancel culture is arguably a much more potent threat for the simple reason that the right is more powerful and therefore has more clout. When President Trump, for example used Twitter to tell his followers that four Congress women (all people of colour) should ‘go back to their country’, he was effectively cancelling them (Beckcom, 2020).

### **An anti-PC campaign?**

We should note that the attack on PC is often part of a sustained campaign waged by conservatives and integral to the culture wars they believe play well with many people (Beckett, 2020). Donald Trump is a proficient exponent, presenting himself as a crusader against PC and frequently identifying PC as a pervasive phenomenon to be eschewed and replaced with commonsense: ‘They [the political establishment] have put political correctness above commonsense, above your safety, above all else. I refuse to be politically correct’. And when challenged about his treatment of women, he retorted, ‘I think the big problem this country has is being politically correct. I’ve been challenged by so many people. I don’t frankly have time for political correctness. And to be honest with you, this country doesn’t have time either’ (Trump

quoted in Weigel, 2016). The campaign against PC in the US has often been well funded and has included as part of its armoury, as we have seen, many academic critiques. Unlike earlier conservative critics such as Bloom, the populist call, however, is no longer to educate the elites (who are now seen as irredeemably liberal) but to replace them. Trump was unsuccessful in winning a second term, but the campaign against PC continues, with conservatives eager to find a more competent leader to replace him:

No national candidate has ever calumniated political correctness with such contempt, and yet no president has ever permitted political correctness to tighten its hold so much on the lives of citizens. The intimidation of common people as sexists and racists grew under Trump. After the #MeToo movement, mandatory anti-sexism workshops proliferated. After last summer's riots over the death of George Floyd, anti-racism slogans were painted over football fields...By the end of Trump's term his tweets were being censored, and so were the Facebook accounts of supporters who even mentioned the slogan "Stop the steal" (Caldwell, 2021)

On this side of the Atlantic in the UK, academics have been quieter, but the right-wing press has waged a long campaign against PC (or its surrogates such as wokeness and cancel culture) which has provided fertile ground for Boris Johnson's brand of populism and helped contribute to the decision for Britain to leave the European Union (Brexit). Boris Johnson as both a right-wing journalist and politician has not been averse to speak disparagingly of people of colour, and in his tweet on the Duke of Edinburgh's retirement from royal duties extolled him in these terms: 'What a fantastic servant of the UK. One of the last bastions of political incorrectness. They don't make them like that any more' (Johnson quoted in Moore, 2017). What I wish to focus on here is his response as Prime Minister to Black Lives Matter (BLM), a movement which initially was distinctly American and a response to police brutality towards Black people but grew in 2020 into a global movement after the killing of George Floyd, a Black man by White police officers was caught on camera. Floyd's murder prompted widespread demonstrations in solidarity with victims of racial injustice across the world, which entailed in the UK the removal of a statue of a slave trader in Bristol and reflection by a number of cultural institutions about their historical role in colonialism and slavery. Nigel Farage, a central figure in the Brexit campaign, like Trump, was highly critical from the start of a movement he castigated as a threat to the British way of life. He prodded Johnson: 'I'm afraid Boris Johnson and the government have gone along with this PC woke agenda' (Farage quoted in Zindelka, 2020). Provoked by Farage, Johnson used a Conservative conference speech to nail his mast to the wind: 'We are proud of this country's culture and history and traditions; they [Labour] literally want to pull statues down, to rewrite the history of our country, to edit our national CV to make it look more politically correct' (Johnson quoted in Beckett, 2020). This speech is part of a wider campaign waged by the right-wing press and increasingly by the government against PC. The 'war on woke' entails identifying different threats to our way of life and lampooning institutions for their virtue signalling capitulation to PC (Malik, 2020b; Hirsch, 2020). One example relates to the initial decision of the BBC to perform an orchestral rather than choral version of two patriotic songs at the Last night of the Proms:

Right-wing newspapers seized on the story...with the Sun running the story under the headline “Land of woke and glory”. They saw the lack of singing as a surrender – not a practical decision that reflected the difficulties of putting on a prom during a pandemic. Cue the intervention of the prime minister: “ I think it’s time we stopped our cringing embarrassment about our history, about our traditions, and about our culture and we stopped this general fight of self-recrimination and wetness” (Johnson quoted in Waterson & Bakare 2020).

In some cases, there have been veiled threats of funding cuts and proposed new laws. The Culture Secretary announced to museums and funding bodies: ‘The government does not support the removal of statues or other similar objects...You should not be taking actions motivated by activism or politics’ (Dowden quoted in Hicks, 2020). The Communities Secretary has subsequently proposed new laws to protect ‘statues, plaques, memorials or monuments...from being removed “at the hands of the flash mob, or by the decree of...town hall militants and woke worthies”’ (Jenrick quoted in Hope, 2021). Meanwhile the Education Secretary summarily dismissed calls for changes to the history curriculum in schools to incorporate Britain’s colonial past and involvement in slavery: ‘We have an incredibly rich history, and we should be incredibly proud of our history because time and time again, this country has made a difference and changed things for the better, right around the world’ (Williamson quoted in Duffy, 2020). At the same time he has introduced new legislation on free speech ‘to counter what he called “unacceptable silencing and censoring” on campuses, despite the paucity of evidence of ‘no platforming’ and repeated reference to a key example of silencing and censoring when in fact ‘the event went ahead’ (Fazackerley, 2021).

But perhaps the most revealing intervention has come from the Minister for women and equalities in a speech where she set out a new approach to equality ‘based on “Conservative values”...and ‘pledged that equality will now be “about individual dignity and humanity, not quotas and targets, or equality of outcome”’. The UK had focused too much on ‘fashionable’ race, sexuality and gender issues:

We will not limit our fight for fairness to the nine protected characteristics laid out in the 2010 Equality Act, which includes sex, race and gender reassignment...the focus on protected characteristics has led to a narrowing of equality debate that overlooks socioeconomic status and geographic inequality. This means some issues – particularly those facing white working class children – are neglected (Truss quoted in Independent editorial 2020).

In a year when we had become more aware of racial injustice and ethnic disparities in outcomes, the Minister seemed to be ‘play[ing] to the culture wars gallery and to be pitting the needs of minorities against those of the working class, when neither of them have been properly addressed’ (Malik, 2020). Challenged about this, ‘Home Secretary Priti Patel [who described the Black Lives Matter protests as “dreadful”] backed Ms Truss’s plans: “We’re focusing on the people’s priorities – we shouldn’t be indulging in fashionable issues of political correctness”’ (Bulman & Oppenheim, 2020).

In the US the attacks on PC have clearly been orchestrated. ‘Most of the conservative books and articles...repeat the same stories, use the same terms and [are] largely funded by bodies known

to have right-wing leanings' (Lea, 2009: 59). And, not surprisingly in a global world, something like that is evident now in the UK, with the recycling of the same themes, the same examples and indeed the same purported intellectual roots in postmodernism/cultural Marxism. The examples are typically 'exaggerated or fabricated in some way'. Famous examples in an earlier period include the story that 'local councils in London had banned black coffee and black bin liners on the grounds that they were racist' (Lea, 2009: 159) and the story that you could no longer celebrate Christmas in Birmingham because the city council had replaced it with Winterval, a story the Daily Mail later acknowledged to be false in 2011. On examination 'almost all claims that "political correctness has gone mad" turn out to be based on hokum and hot air (O'Brien, 2018: 117; see Alibhai-Brown 2018 and Johnson 2017 for further examples). This unfortunately does not mean that they are not believed even years after first being aired. The campaign 'by the conservative right in the US [has been] very successful' in creating a PC bogeyman and stigmatizing the Left (Lea, 2009: 261) and there is evidence that it is making significant headway in the UK (O'Hagan, 2020). Irrespective of whether there has been an orchestrated campaign waged against political correctness, there is no doubt that PC or rather than anti-PC has reemerged in the last decade as a major interpretive framework in the media uncritically reproduced by many journalists.

### **Is the threat from the Left as serious as the threat from the Right?**

Critics of PC focus on what they see as a threat from the Left, whether it is conceived as comprising social justice activists, PC idealists or the 'equality, diversity and inclusion mob'. There is no doubt that the equality, diversity and inclusion mob, to use Jordan Peterson's preferred terminology, has 'many flaws and idiocies' as someone sympathetic to PC acknowledges. These flaws and idiocies include being overly prescriptive on what is acceptable language, being sanctimonious, 'hiding inconvenient truths' and sometimes making 'excuses for miscreants...because they come from groups that are discriminated against' (Alibhai-Brown 2018: 11; 145). At the same time, however, we should note the progress that this mob (sic) helped initiate in jettisoning racist, sexist and homophobic slurs and reducing unfair discrimination.

It's worth looking back at what was considered annoyingly, outrageously, politically correct in the 1980s... You know adding women or people of colour to the Western Civilisation curriculum, or not making gay jokes or using "retard" as an epithet. I get it: new concepts, new words stick in your throat. The way we're used to talking and thinking seems natural and normal, by definition. And then the new terms, new concepts that have social utility stick, and those that don't fall away (Goldberg in Fry et al 2018). What felt like uncomfortable intrusions at one time are now more or less taken for granted.

Much more serious in my view than any purported threat from the Left is the threat from the Right. Here can be found, initially in the US but increasingly in the UK, the perpetrators of dangerous conspiracy theories and serious violence. The US paedophile cult conspiracy theory has now taken root in Europe, with 'one in four people in the UK now believing in conspiracy theories propagated by QAnon' (Sommerlad, 2021). And far right terrorism is now a much more significant threat than terrorism by other perpetrators. 'In 2018 far right convictions in the UK

surpassed those of Islamic terror organisations for the first time. In the US, white-orchestrated terrorism claimed more lives on US soil than any other identity-based terrorism since 9/11...but the threat such white identity politics poses is often trivialised' (Malik, 2019a: 138-9). We recognize Black Lives Matter as an example of identity politics, which seeks to secure rights denied to people because of their identity, but we should also acknowledge that whiteness is an identity and that white identity politics played a role in Brexit and the election of President Trump, and can take dangerous forms.

## **Conclusion**

At the risk of provoking the wrath of PC critics, by referring to their major bete noire, what I have been arguing is that an anti-PC discourse has become the dominant discourse in a Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1980). It comprises a particular way of talking about and thinking about the world which in turn shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it. It does not merely reflect the world, but re-presents it. It constructs political correctness so that those subject to the discourse can see its pervasiveness and discover it all around them. Alibhai-Brown (2018) describes this discourse as an anti-PC orthodoxy and Hirsch (2019) as an anti-woke orthodoxy.

This discourse has proved very persuasive and underpinned the success of the Brexiteers in the EU referendum and the advent of Trump to the American Presidency. This has given succour to those who wish to go back in time and conjure up an imaginary past (Take back control for the Brexiteers; Make American great again for the Trump supporters).

I have argued that the distinctiveness of this discourse in its most recent iteration is twofold: a belief that freedom of speech, which should be absolute, is under grave threat, and a belief that fragile younger people demand to be protected from offensive speech. Both these beliefs turn out on inspection to be deeply flawed. This has not, however, prevented the discourse becoming hegemonic and indeed a campaign being mounted to spread the word and reinforce the message. The world is in the process turned upside down, with antiracism (and feminism) seen as the problem rather than racism (and sexism), and, despite the manifest evidence on racial (and gender) disparities to the contrary, white men seen as victims. Black Lives Matter (and the #MeToo) movements are the latest casualties, being transmogrified from movements seeking social justice to become 'symbols of censorship and reverse discrimination' which threaten our way of life (Malik, 2020c). The upshot is that attempts to promote equality, diversity and inclusion become presented as 'sabotage, as attacks on a society that is fundamentally good and not in need of reform...[But] the PC myth does not only work to dampen efforts for change by repackaging these efforts as assaults, it also works to absolve people for their prejudices...being used as "coded cover" for those who "still want to say Paki, spastic or queer"' (Malik, 2019a: 60; 84; 91). In other words, the anti-PC discourse comprises an ideology which delegitimizes a social justice agenda and gives people permission to remain locked in their prejudices. As such it is inherently unethical.

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