**Has anti-political correctness gone mad?**

**Professor Andrew Pilkington**

**University of Northampton, UK**

*Abstract: The concept of political correctness gone mad has re-emerged in the last decade as a major interpretive framework in the media, routinely drawn upon by (conservative) journalists and indeed politicians. This paper examines not only the arguments mounted by conservative critics of political correctness but also those presented in an influential television programme entitled Has political correctness gone mad? Presented by a prominent figure with considerable experience of anti-racism, the programme argues that PC has become so pervasive that it has regrettably been responsible for Brexit and the success of populist politicians such as Donald Trump. These arguments, which turn out to be closely related to those of conservative critics, are critically examined and found not only to be flawed but deeply misleading. It is not a PC discourse that is dominant but an anti-PC discourse which holds sway. An anti-PC discourse not only facilitated Brexit and the rise of populism but also comprises an ideology which de-legitimises an agenda concerned to promote social justice.*

**KEY WORDS**

Political correctness, woke, discourse, equality, racism

**What is 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).

 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 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),

In 2017 Trevor Phillips, the first Chair of the UK 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 it is indeed, as we shall see later, by Phillips, himself. The examples (Ridler, 2020; Hitchens 2020) above 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, Douglas Murray 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 (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 weaponized and used in conservative media circles as an (Hirsch 2019; Hunt 2020;). 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 broadcaster 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 as two recent surveys of people’s attitudes in the UK demonstrate. A 2018 YouGov poll in the UK which 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 in the UK 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 into this picture.

**How did a negative image of political correctness emerge?**

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 (D’Sousa 1991; Kimball 1990). Decrying the influence of what they characterized as 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).

**What distinguishes the contemporary conception of political correctness?**

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. In the absence of serious issues any longer relating to race, gender and sexuality, attention is instead, it is argued, 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 Phillips 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 2019, 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 the state of universities and contemporary students has been presented in the UK (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, 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).

**Has political correctness gone mad?**

We should not assume that political correctness is only perceived as a threat from the right. Many commentators who see themselves as liberal such as Morgan (2020) or on the left such as Fox (2016) share the concern of conservative critics. I shall focus in this section on a prominent figure on the left in the UK, Trevor Phillips who has spent much of his life as a fervent campaigner for racial justice and was both Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality and its successor the Equality and Human Rights Commission in the UK. The rationale for choosing to focus on him is because, by doing so, I seek to demonstrate how at least in the UK an anti-PC discourse is not the preserve of the right but is much more pervasive across the political spectrum

Trevor Phillips has not been afraid to take up positions which are anathema to many of his former colleagues. He has thus for some time attacked what he sees as shibboleths on the left, shifting for example from an advocate of multiculturalism to a radical critic. It is perhaps not surprising in this context to find him agreeing with much of the analysis of the conservative critics of PC above. He goes further, however, and in a series of newspaper articles and a tv programme entitled, *Has political correctness gone mad?* argues that fear of offending minorities has stifled legitimate debate and laid the ground for Brexit and the rise of populist leaders like Trump.

Phillips is by no means alone in identifying a backlash against political correctness as responsible for the rise of populism. Here is Stephen Fry: PC through ‘prescribing language and forcing people to use uncomfortable and silly phrases...is a recruiting sergeant for the right’. For views which go underground fester, with people turning to politicians who dare to utter such views (Fry et al 2018, 23). This is also the view of Frank Field, the (ex) Labour MP who criticised the decision of two public schools not to accept a £1.million bequest to help poor white boys on the grounds that this entailed racial discrimination: ‘It has exposed all the politically correct stuff you get in this area. These schools have learned nothing from Brexit’ (Zindulka, 2020). Matthew Syed, a journalist agrees and argues that ‘a climate of political correctness…has stifled free speech’. While ‘political correctness started as a wonderful thing [with] most people…delighted that the n-word and other hateful phrases have been removed from public discourse’, it has gone too far and entailed the ‘suppression of open dialogue’. This has in turn fanned a sense of grievance and led to increasing polarisation (Syed 2020).

The overall argument of *Has political correctness gone mad?* is quite clear. Political correctness is pervasive and, by stifling debate, has inadvertently led to the rise of the far right. Phillips seeks to substantiate this argument in the programme by recounting examples and through interviewing individuals and small groups. Let us take each of these in turn.

Censorship on the BBC of politicians like Marine Le Penn, a French far right politician and the refusal by the police to allow Pegida, an anti-Islamic organisation to demonstrate in the city centre does not in Phillips’ view protect the vulnerable but fuels extremism. A series of vox pops illustrate how people feel they can’t comfortably say things important to them for fear of being accused of being racist or homophobic. Ordinary people’s views don’t count and resentment builds up. An interview with Nigel Farage, a right-wing politician who played a key role in Britain leaving the European Union (Brexit), reinforces this view. Farage claims that there has been a taboo on talking about immigration since 1968 and that people expressing sceptical views on gay marriage are routinely abused. Phillips concurs: ‘Hypersensitivity about offending minorities has…stopped us having a grown-up debate about migration (Phillips 2017b). And online abuse has proliferated, with Caroline Criado-Perez, a feminist who successfully campaigned for Jane Austin to replace Charles Darwin on the £10 bank note, receiving such threatening abuse that (a few of) the perpetrators were prosecuted. While the latter defended themselves in terms of their right to free speech, Phillips acknowledges that there should be some limits to freedom of expression to protect other people’s right to free speech. Nonetheless, we need, Phillips argues, to loosen the limits on what can be legitimately expressed and debate different views. There is in his view an important distinction between words and actions. Legislation prohibiting what people say as opposed to what they do is not helpful, and we need to live with the fact that we will sometimes be offended. While a focus group in Manchester acknowledged that words which exemplify disparaging references to people’s identity (based on gender, sexual orientation, religion and especially race) should be avoided, there was little appetite for proscribing language except in the case of race and religion and even here, Phillips argues, it is not possible to ban specific words since their use is context dependent. Despite this, some young people, Phillips argues, ‘avoid open debate’ and seek to ban certain words and images and thus engage in ‘virtue signalling’ (Phillips 2017a).

For Trevor Phillips, universities are ‘leading the charge’ in banning things in case they cause offence. ‘Hardly a day goes by on campuses without a demand for a statue to be removed or for safe spaces where sensitive students can be sheltered from robust views in a cultural debate or sexual violence in a classic literary text’ (Phillips 2017b). To understand what is going on with safe space policies, Phillips invited 7 students to decide whether wearing particular clothing was ‘safe’ or ‘unsafe’: cross dressing for fun and Pocahontas costumes were deemed unsafe while Mexican restaurants distributing sombreros were seen as straddling the line. The National Union of Students (NUS) ‘no platform’ policy, which ironically Phillips helped create and has the support of two thirds of students, is even more threatening than safe space policies to free speech. The initial adoption of the policy of ‘no platform for racists’ in 1973 by the NUS had a clear rationale: ‘to keep campuses clear of speakers who wanted to throw people of colour out of Britain…but over time the “no platform” policy [has] degenerated into an excuse for political bullies to shut down debate and to impose bans on people who [a]re clearly not racists’ (Phillips 2017a). The campaign, defended on the programme by the trans-campaigner, Paris Lees, to prevent the feminist, Germaine Greer from giving a lecture at Cardiff University because of her comments on transgender people is a case in point, though it should be pointed out that the campaign was not successful and Greer gave her lecture. For Phillips, this campaign is indicative of a cancel culture which can entail in extreme cases people losing their jobs, as in the case of Sir Tom Hunt who was forced to resign his position at University College London after a twitter storm occasioned by a poor joke he made at a conference about ‘the trouble with girls in science’.

There are two broad reasons, Phillips concludes, why political correctness has indeed gone mad. The first revolves around confusing symbols with substance: ‘I get it that [there’s a need to] protect women, ethnic minorities, LGBT people from hurtful abuse. But no-platforming Germaine Greer won’t help the boy who really feels he wants to be a girl; sacking a distinguished scientist won’t get more women into engineering degrees; and an employer *not* calling me “nigger” to my face won’t stop my job application hitting the waste basket’. The second relates to the avoidance of open debate on a whole range of issues: ‘The strategy of defending diversity by stifling debate has backfired spectacularly…The outcome? Brexit. President Donald Trump. And, though I fervently hope not, possibly President Marine Le Pen’ (Phillips 2017a)

**How persuasive is the argument mounted by Trevor Phillips?**

What is immediately apparent is the similarity between the position taken up by Trevor Phillips on political correctness and the (predominantly conservative) critique outlined earlier. Free speech is under threat and students increasingly seek protection from speech which they consider offensive. Where Phillips differs is in his acknowledgement that we need to curb speech when it directly entails violence to others. In other words, he does not support absolute freedom of speech as the libertarians do and acknowledges the need for some hate crime laws and equality legislation.

Phillips tends to rely on anecdotes, case studies and interviews with a small number of people to substantiate his case. The question arises as to whether these bear too much weight, and a few isolated incidents are conflated into a misleading overall narrative. Let us first examine the evidence that free speech is under threat and students are increasingly censorious.

Phillips at times makes a hard and fast distinction between words and actions, but this ignores the fact that language can shape behaviour and that hateful speech can generate hateful actions. Earlier in his career, Phillips played a key role in the development of legislation in 2006 to prevent incitement to racial and religious hatred, and he still acknowledges the need for such measures. Indeed, he is adamant when discussing the case of Criado-Perez that prosecuting individuals for online abuse that entails violent threats or incites hatred is justifiable. Freedom of speech, ceteris paribus, should not be curtailed but it is necessary sometimes to limit freedom of expression so that it is enjoyed by all people. While the right to free speech is an important principle, we are often faced with dilemmas when principles collide. Take the two cases mentioned at the beginning of the programme: the curtailment of the right to protest of an anti-Islamic organization and the decision of a national broadcaster not to provide a platform for the leader of an erstwhile fascist party. Leaving aside the fact that the organizer of the Pegida demonstration chose the location agreed with the police, and the fact that the BBC has in fact interviewed Marine Le Pen, what these cases illustrate are competing principles in play. Unless one believes in absolute free speech, it is perfectly reasonable to disagree as to where the balance should be struck between say the right to express ideas and other principles relating to social order and living without the threat of violence. Sometimes it is legitimate to curtail freedom of speech. Many of the people interviewed claimed that this has gone too far and complained that they couldn’t comfortably say things but to believe, as the uncritical use of vox pops suggests, that people really are being silenced and that white middle class men are no more able to say what they think than members of minority groups beggars belief. Take Farage, for example. His contention that immigration has been a taboo topic since 1968 was not challenged by Phillips but is (to put it mildly) highly debatable. An anti-immigration (along with an anti-EU) discourse has been a staple diet of much of the tabloid press for most of the post-war period and measures to control immigration, coupled more recently with targets to cut net migration, have been common. As one writer puts it, ‘This sense that immigration was never discussed was successfully mainstreamed even though vilification of immigrants in political discourse and their persecution in the legislation of the country was commonplace’ (Malik 2019, 68).

Finally, we come to Trevor Phillips’s views on students. His characterisation of them as snowflakes incapable of tolerating dissenting opinions is a caricature and manifests little recognition of the legitimacy of the demand by some students for safe spaces/no platforming or more widely the movement for decolonising the curriculum. Instead there is a tendency to lampoon the students and rely upon unrepresentative anecdotes. The latter don’t stand up to scrutiny. Safe space policies and no platform policies do not indicate the abandonment of liberal principles or the avoidance of debate. ‘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). As for no platforming, it should be noted that ‘the fundamental act of not inviting a speaker is not itself an assault on free speech’ (Riley 2021, 11; see also Baer 2019). 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) and ‘ChangeSU found in the last 12 months not a single speaker had been banned from speaking at a students’ union’ (Bouattia, 2017). While we may agree with Phillips that the focus of attention of students is not always on the substance as opposed to the symbols of social injustice, his overall picture of students is a gross caricature. This is not to say that Phillips hasn’t some interesting things to say. He is in my view right to point out that, while we should treat each other sensitively and be polite, policies outlawing the use of particular words can’t work (Ackroyd & Pilkington 2007) and that we are bound sometimes to offend and be offended. His overall argument, however, that free speech is under threat and students shut down debate, is not substantiated.

**How persuasive is the argument mounted by conservative critics of PC?**

In its most recent iteration, political correctness signifies a serious threat to free speech and ‘creeping tyranny on our campuses’ (Phillips 2017a). Phillips has not substantiated his claim that PC in this sense is pervasive. The question still arises, however, as to whether the arguments mounted by PC critics further to the right are more persuasive in this regard.

In many respects, these arguments do not differ markedly from those of Phillips. And where they do, they are even less convincing than those of Phillips. Take for example the belief in absolute free speech which brooks no limits. And take their belief in a marketplace of ideas. While free debate is indeed vital, a sine qua non of a healthy democracy and critical for scientific progress, the notion that the arena for debate comprises a marketplace of ideas is misleading because in practice ‘the market is skewed and not all ideas receive equal representation’ (Malik 2019, 112). Oligopolies such as Fox Corporation hold sway and the voices of white middle class men tend to be privileged.

It is in fact 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. 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 [but] to brand this as “silencing” is itself an assault on free expression (Malik, 2019, 107).

As for what is happening with university students, it is worth noting 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. 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). There is little evidence in fact that academic freedom is under threat as a Parliamentary cross-party investigation confirmed: ‘Press accounts of widespread suppression of free speech are clearly out of kilter with reality’ (Titley 2020, 80).

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). 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 2019) and 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 and in this way garner more publicity (Titley, 2020). They present themselves as victims but have certainly not been silenced.

Contrary to the view propagated by PC critics, cancel culture is by no means a purely left-wing phenomenon. David Olusoga puts it well:

‘“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.

**Has political correctness fueled a backlash and generated extremism?**

Political correctness is, as we saw earlier, a concept with negative connotations and the focus of tabloid ire. While much of the anti-PC bile has come from the right, it is not their exclusive preserve, with many individuals, like Phillips, who see themselves as further to the left, sharing many of the same views. Rather than visualising political correctness as a pervasive phenomenon, however, I would suggest that an anti-PC discourse has become the dominant discourse in a Foucauldian sense (Foucault, 1980). This anti-PC discourse 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.

Contrary to the position of those who argue that PC fuelled a populist backlash, I wish to argue that the right has successfully used this anti-PC discourse to create a populist movement and mobilise disaffected voters. Drawing upon an anti-immigration discourse popularised by much of the tabloid press, along with an anti-PC discourse, the right has identified a range of bogeymen including immigrants, Muslims and the do-gooding elite. ‘By 2016 in the US and UK, the myth of PC had so taken hold that the grievance boil it had been nourishing for years finally burst’ with the vote to leave the European Union in the referendum (Brexit) and the advent of Donald Trump to the US presidency (Malik 2019, 68). What is noteworthy here is the ‘strong correlation between a perception of politically correct language orthodoxy and support for Trump’ (Malik, 2019, 64) and ‘direct correlation between antipathy towards the EU and perceptions of PC muzzling’ (Malik, 2019: 70). The evidence of a massive split in perception, across the EU referendum divide is remarkable: ‘By 49 to 39 per cent, Remainers are convinced that people are free to say what they think, but Leavers believe – by a crushing 60 to 26 margin – that there are important things that Britain can’t talk about’ (Clark 2019). Conjuring up a sense that we are victims of PC, the right has successfully helped encourage those who are anti PC feel ‘that they are in fact courageous to go against this imaginary tide’ (Malik 2019, 89).

In the process conservatives draw upon a picture of Britain as ‘an unreal land of distorted memories and colonial amnesia’. The Britain we are enjoined to believe in ‘was simultaneously the biggest Empire on earth and the tiny underdog that stood alone in 1940 going on to defeat the Nazis with only bit part assistance from the US and USSR’ (Olusoga, 2019) . Unlike Germany which after 1968 began to come to terms with its Nazi past, the UK has yet to come to terms with its past and lives in a fantasy world. We thus quietly forget our role in the atrocities in the Kenyan detention camps in the 1950s, but never stop going on about the fact that we won the war (Younge, 2019). A recent book argues that ‘a dangerous imperialist conception of our standing in the world…was the catalyst for the process leading up to Brexit, especially for those arguing most fervently for Brexit’. In the context of growing inequality and poverty, and ‘decades of innuendo and then outright propaganda suggesting that immigration was the main source of their woes’, a small majority were persuaded to vote Brexit. Ignorant of Britain’s imperial history and fuelled by a misplaced nostalgia that saw the Empire as a force for good, enough people were persuaded to ‘take back control’ and put the great back into Great Britain (Dorling & Tomlinson 2019, 3, 7). Contrary to the views of those who dismiss Cambridge inquiring into its links with slavery, it is arguably important that we cure ourselves of amnesia so that we become less susceptible to accept myths of the past.

**Conclusion**

Contrary to Phillips and other critics who point to the pervasiveness and tyranny of political correctness, it is an anti-PC discourse that is dominant. 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 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 (partially) 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 2020). It is not political correctness that has gone mad. It is anti-political correctness. We should not, however, give up hope. As the popularity of the Black Lives Matter movement demonstrates, this discourse is not completely hegemonic and can be both deconstructed and resisted.

**Bibliography**

Ackroyd, Judith. and Andrew Pilkington. 2007. “’You Are Not Allowed to Say That’ Minefields and Political Correctness”, *Caribbean Quarterly,* 53 (1&2): 49-62.

Alibhai-Brown, Yasmin. 2018. *In defence of Political Correctness.* London: Biteback Publishing.

Baer, Ulrich. 2019. *What Snowflakes Get Right.* New York: Oxford University Press.

Bernstein, Richard. 1990. “The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct”. *New York Times,* October 28, 2007.

Biggar, Nigel. 2019. “Cambridge is Lost in a Cloud of Leftist Virtue Signaling”, *The Times,* May 3, 2019.

Bloom, Alan. 1987. *The Closing of the American Mind.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Bouattia, Malia. 2017. “Trevor Phillips Blames and Shames a Whole Generation for a Problem We Did Not Create”, *Huffington Post*, February 24, 2007.

Civitas. 2020. “Academic Freedom in our Universities: The Best and the Worst”. Accessed February 15, 2021. <https://www.civitas.org.uk/><https://www.civitas.org.uk/content/files/Academic-Freedom-in-Our-Universities.pdf>

Clark, Tom. 2018. “Free speech? New Polling Suggest Britain is ‘Less PC’ than Trump’s America”, *Prospect Magazine*, Accessed February 16, 2021 <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/> [Free speech? New polling suggests Britain is "less PC" than Trump's America - Prospect Magazine](https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/magazine/free-speech-new-polling-suggests-britain-is-less-pc-than-trumps-america).

Dabhoiwala, Fara.. 2020. “Frees Speech Wars Review – From Censorship to Cancel Culture”. *The Guardian*, December 2, 2020.

Davies, William. 2018. “The Free Speech Panic: How the Right Concocted a Crisis”. *The Guardian*, July 26, 2018.

Dorling, Daniel. and Sally Tomlinson. 2019. *Rule Britannia.* London: Biteback Press.

D’Sousa, Dinesh. 1991. *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus.* New York: The Free Press.

Dunant, Sarah. (ed) 1994. *The War of the Words: The Political Correctness Debate.* London: Virago.

Ferguson, Neil. 2019a. “Join My NATO or Watch Critical Thinking Die”. *Sunday Times*, April 14, 2019.

Ferguson, Neil. 2019b. “Free speech is in Free Fall in Silicon Valley”. *Sunday Times*. June 9, 2019.

Foucault, Michel. 1980. *Power/Knowledge.* Brighton: Harvester.

Fox, Clare. 2016 *I Still find that Offensive.* London: Biteback Publishing.

Fry, Stephen, Jordan Peterson, J., Michael Dyson and Michelle Goldberg. 2018. *Political Correctness Gone Mad?* London: Oneworld Publications.

Furedi, Frank. 2016. *What’s Happened to the University? A Sociological Exploration of its Infantalisation.* London: Routledge.

Green, David. 2019. *“We’re Nearly All Victims Now”.* London: Civitas.

Hirsch, Afua. 2019. “The Struggle for Equality is Real. The ‘Woke Police’ are a Myth”. *The Guardian*, September 26, 2019.

Hitchens, Peter. 2020. “I Fear Anyone Who Dissents from Today’s Pervasive Culture of Political Correctness Will be Visited by the Thought Police”. *Daily Mail,* March 15, 2020.

Hunt, Kenya. 2020) “How The World Woke Up”. *The Guardian,* November 21, 2020.

Kimball, Roger. 1990. *Tenured Radicals. How Politics has Corrupted Our Higher Education.* New York: HarperCollins.

Lea, John. 2009. *Political Correctness and Higher Education*. London: Routledge.

Lukianoff, Greg and Jonathan Haidt, J. 2019 *The Coddling of the American Mind.* London: Penguin.

Lyons, Izzy. and Harry Yorke. 2019 “Cambridge University Inquiry into Slave Trade Connections is ‘Virtue Signaling’ on Steroids’”. *Daily Telegraph*, April 30, 2019.

Malik, Nesrine. 2019. *We Need New Stories*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

Malik, Nesrine. 2020 “Right Wing Media Slurs Will Not Halt Black Lives Matter”, *The Guardian,* September 19, 2020.

Monbiot, George. 2018. “How US Billionaires are Fueling the Hard Right Cause in Britain”. *The Guardian*, December 7, 2018.

Morgan, Piers. 2020. *Wake Up: Why the World’s Gone Nuts.* London: HarperCollins.

Murray, Andrew. 2019. “Generation Snowflake?”. *RSA Journal,* 2018-19 (4)*,* 44-47.

Murray, Douglas. 2020. *The Madness of Crowds*. London: Bloomsbury.

Olusoga, David. 2019. “Britain Can’t be Reborn while We’re still Lost in Fantasies about the Past”. *The Guardian*, June 2, 2019..

Olusoga, David. 2021. “’Cancel Culture’ is not the Preserve of the Left. Just Ask Our Historians”. *The Guardian*, January 3, 2021.

Parris, Matthew. 2019. “Let’s Stop Kidding Ourselves We’re Tolerant”. *The Sunday Times,* October 25, 2019.

Pearson, Geoffrey. 1983. *Hooligan.* London: Palgrave.

Phillips, Trevor. 2017a “Students Flee Reality, and the Far Right Rises”. *Sunday Times*, February 19, 2017.

Phillips, Trevor. 2017b. “The Day I was Accused of Being Racist, I Knew Political Correctness Had Gone Mad”. *Daily Mail*, February 23, 2017.

Phillips. Trevor. 2020a “When You Erase a Nation’s Past You Threaten its Future”. *The Times*, September 19, 2020.

Phillips, Trevor. 2020b. “The March of Wokeism is an All-Pervasive New Oppression”. *The Times*, November 7, 2020.

Ridler, Faith. 2020. “Political Correctness Does Not Address the Real Problem Faced by Ethnic Minorities, Says Head of the National Black Police Association. *Daily Mail*, November 15, 2020.

Riley, Charlotte. 2021. (ed) *The Free Speech Wars.* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Shipman, Tim. 2020. “Voters Seek Return to Common Sense in Revolt Against Political Correctness”. *Sunday Times*, May 24, 2020.

Sparrow, Jeff. 2017. “’Political Correctness’ Has No Meaning. That’s the Main Appeal”. *The Guardian*, March 23, 2017.

Syed, Matthew. 2020 “Don’t Speak in Code on Race: Truth Saves Lives”. *Sunday Times*, August 2, 2020.

Symons, Julia. 2018. “Has Political Correctness Gone Too Far?”. *The Economist*, September 10, 2018. Accessed August 4, 2021. <https://www.economist.com/open-future/2018/09/10/has-political-correctness-gone-too-far>

Titley, Gavan. 2020. *Is Free Speech Racist?* Cambridge: Polity.

Turner, Janice. 2020. “The Woke Left is the New Ministry of Truth”. *The Times,* July 11, 2020.

Weigel, Moira. 2016. “Political Correctness: How the Right Invented a Phantom Enemy”. *The Guardian*, November 30, 2016.

Younge, Gary. 2019. “Our Glorious Past is What We Remember. The Brutality Behind it We’ve Forgotten”. *The Guardian*, May 31, 2019..

Zindulka, Kurt. 2020 “Racism: Top UK Schools Reject Scholarship Funding for Poor White Boys”. *Breitbart.* January 1, 2020. <https://www.breitbart.com/><https://www.breitbart.com/europe/2020/01/01/racism-top-schools-reject-scholarship-funding-for-poor-white-boys/>