**The Confused Nature of Censorship and the Relevance of Dissent in Contemporary Western Culture**

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We witness today an unclear standard of censorship. In particular, the issue of political correctness has become predominant in much of the discourse of the Western world. On the one hand, there seems to be a strict criterion of what one is allowed to say or not to say in public and before audiences. An exploration of this phenomenon, therefore, is important, so as to discern what it entails and the ways in which censorship ties in, as well as some examples of censorship on grounds of political correctness. We will also explore other examples that—according to the same logic of censorship—should seem to be censored, but are not. If this is the case, it suggests that there is a lack of coherence at work in contemporary censorship—where what is and what is not to be censored appear as being picked and chosen. This perhaps reflects an agenda-driven form of censorship that is responsible for the filtering we witness. In this paper, we will not attempt to discern the exact nature of this form of censorship, as this is such so as to not be easily discerned. We will focus on some of its symptoms expressed in some examples of what is and what is not censored—and in turn what is vocalized as being reprehensible—where the issue of conscience would come into play, as well as what seems to fall through the nets. Ultimately, we will voice an exhortation for all concerned to personally put careful thought to discerning this seeming incoherence in the nature of contemporary censorship so as to come closer to an understanding of the entities or ideologies at its root, and dissent where and how this may be appropriate.

We will now proceed to look into certain cases where censorship or the lack thereof is expressed. The National Union of Students (NUS) in the United Kingdom offers a good example of the particular political-correctness-driven[[1]](#footnote-2) form of censorship at work today, and merits looking into. The element of the NUS that deals formally or informally with censorship is its “No Platform” policy. No Platform began as a policy within the NUS designed to deny a speaking platform to figures with fascist and racist views, and individuals in turn associated with these figures. The denial of a platform to such figures, who condone a truly problematic view, reflects a logic of justice and defense of vulnerable groups which would seem to be grounded on conscience. The censorship of No Platform, then, is expressed in denying audience to such figures, denying them the opportunity to voice their views. In its particular origins, the original agenda of No Platform made sense and seems to have been praiseworthy: issues of fascism and racism are serious, and individuals condoning these views should, in most contexts, be censored. Eventually, however, the logic behind No Platform began to expand and became no longer easily identifiable. The criterion of censorship through platform denial began to apply to views different from the originals of racism and fascism.

One of the views that stands out and has been the subject of much controversy, due to the particular way it has been addressed by the NUS’ policy, is what is called “transphobia” [[2]](#footnote-3). As mentioned, originally designed to censor the threat and hate speech of fascist and racist sympathizers, No platform has ultimately digressed to censor other views under the criteria of preventing “hate speech” that offends and threatens the students and audience that host the speakers’ platforms. “Transphobia” now falls under this category. Not only is the labeling of ideological dissent as “hate speech” dubious; the way in which the NUS has censored this “hateful” ideology has been particularly distasteful and concerning. The journalist Sara Ditum points out the difference between disagreements about ideas and personal attacks or acts of violence[[3]](#footnote-4). As we shall see, NUS’ no platform policy seems, in this sense, to throw the baby out with the bathwater, failing to distinguish between the two. Among others, Ditum offers the example of Julie Bindel, a vocal member of the lesbian feminist community who nonetheless is skeptical of transgenderism. Ms. Bindel was harassed by several trans women in spite of having vocalized nothing hateful against them and merely drawing attention to what she finds to be a logical incoherence with the essence of transgenderism[[4]](#footnote-5); namely, she was harassed for a personal ideological view. Bindel was nonetheless not forgiven. She has been “no platformed” multiple times and has also received death threats and physical attacks for her views.

Sara Ditum attributes a still greater seriousness to the phenomenon of NUS’ censorship under No Platform; she expresses the basic view that democracy itself is to a significant extent founded on the ability to engage non-violently in debate about competing views. NUS’ case, moreover, is by no means isolated. It is product and part of a larger movement that condemns any views not approved by certain ideological agendas and the predominant logic of political correctness. In the current that No Platform forms a part of, dissent is labeled offence and ultimately hate speech. On these grounds, such ideological disagreements are ultimately censored, if not as dramatically as has recently been the case with NUS, then in other more subtle ways. Sara Ditum points out that, when things develop in this way, and as Julie Bindel’s case demonstrates, “the consequences become alarming”[[5]](#footnote-6).

We witness in the NUS’ particular form of censorship with No Platform a logic that picks and chooses which views are allowed to be voiced and which ones are not. One can only question, “what is at work here?” It seems that through its condemnation of figures skeptical of transgenderism, the NUS sees such dissent on the same terms as it would see other truly discriminatory ideologies such as racism and fascism, its original targets and views that are consensually held to be unacceptable. By attempting to par other forms of ideological dissent with views like racism and fascism, the NUS finds adequate grounds for censorship through the denial of platforms. Aside from the possible problems with this type of strategic move by the part of the obscure agenda behind NUS’ censorship policies, it will be helpful nonetheless to abstract what, at least in a basic sense, NUS’ grounds for censorship are.

The NUS holds the transgender community as a vulnerable group that must be protected. Like racial minorities that are victims to racism, transgenders, it would seem, are victims to the equivalent of racism to certain ethnic groups—namely, the dissent to transgenderism on intellectual grounds. This ideological disagreement has been duly labeled “transphobia”. Moreover, by equating dissent on intellectual grounds to personal attacks or threats, the NUS and other organizations who slam ideological dissenters define this disagreement as offensive, oppressive, and hateful. Like racism—the logic would seem to go—“transphobia” must be censored.

Really considering this, however, it becomes clear that a direct threat by individuals denied platform is not quite what the NUS is concerned with. As Julie Bindel’s case demonstrates—and how the expansion of NUS criteria for reprehensible individuals corroborates—the mere ideological disagreement to something the NUS approves of is grounds for censorship and stigmatization. Operating thus, NUS’ censorship through No Platform seems to reflect a quasi-totalitarian regime of censorship that preaches that certain views are not only reprehensible, but that they are so to such a degree that they should not even be uttered before an audience at all. To most who are intellectually honest, this should strike at the very least as concerning.

To proceed, even if the logic of censorship due to the threatening and offensive nature of a certain view cannot truly be applied to some cases of dissent on intellectual grounds like the one just presented, such logic can nonetheless be applied to other areas in our contemporary society that are not subject to censorship but perhaps ought to be. One such area where the parallel is not obvious but can nonetheless be articulated is the nature of the use of women in certain types of advertisement.

This can be observed most explicitly in the publicity for brands such as Intimissimi/Calzedonia in Europe, or Victoria’s Secret in the United States (though such advertisement is by no means exclusive to lingerie companies). One might object that depicting semi-nude women in lingerie is necessary to advertise these brands’ products. This would seem to make sense from a marketing point of view, but, as we shall illuminate, the problem is much more complicated than this.

Namely, this sort of advertisement capitalizes on an intense projecting of sensuality. Ads of this sort are designed to be highly provocative. Moreover, though one might object that there are similar advertisements depicting men, the use of women in advertisement is a lot more lucrative and therefore pervasive. A further thing to consider is that one may see these ads nearly everywhere indiscriminately: street corners, all sorts of magazines, outside pharmacies, and other public spaces.

Now, where is this all going? Well, just giving a little thought to the phenomenon we have been describing, we may realize that certain problems with these depictions may arise. More specifically, these ads may fall subject to a similar criteria that—notwithstanding to what extent it is correctly applied—the NUS uses to effect censorship with No Platform, not in the form of views expressed but rather in the implications of their particular depictions. That said, this should not come as particularly noteworthy in a society in which sex is capitalized on for commercial purposes. Nonetheless, this normalization of the pervasiveness of sexuality does not do away with negative consequences.

To continue, the culture of the advertisement we are describing persuades its audience (namely everyone who encounters these) to take women at face value. By presenting mainly a highly attractive physical depiction, this culture communicates that sensual appeal is women’s primary aspect. Their specific poses and gestures, moreover, present women as willing commodities to be enjoyed at leisure.

Though not apparent at first, what we have just presented in the reductivism of woman through advertisement is directly germane to the obscure nature of censorship in contemporary society.

Specifically, if it seems too totalitarian to attempt to censor all such advertisement that effects a reductivism of women, nonetheless other discussions can be engaged. For example, if even if at the request of many, banning would be too problematic, could one imagine a dialogue about the proper context and place for these sorts of advertisements? Namely, could censorship come into play when discussing the relative merits of having this marketing so easily accessible and pervasive; for instance, in regards to children. Could censorship be applicable, if one is to explore the rights children may have at not being so easily exposed to these? Such questions are worth pondering. Rather than prescribe a specific solution to this potential problem, we are trying to highlight the fact that there is no discourse *at all* of whether some form of censorship is applicable to this advertisement culture and other phenomena like it.

Having considered this, it is worthwhile to draw attention to what the censorship on the grounds of political correctness mainly applies to. It seems that the “hot potatoes” of censorship are any sort of statement of race, gender distinction, or LGBT issues such as the “transphobia” that is so loathed by the NUS and similar organizations. The phenomenon is that nothing about any of these issues that goes against the obscure agenda of political correctness (PC) can or should be given voice in public forums. A tangible example of this phenomenon are not only the censorship effected by NUS’ No Platform, but countless other examples of public figures that have been slammed or censored for voicing or representing views the PC behemoth deems taboo. One such case is that of the incumbent Turkish prime minister, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Erdoğan has been denounced as a sexist and a fundamentalist for voicing the view that there is a real distinction between men and women and elevating the concept of motherhood by exhorting women to have more children.[[6]](#footnote-7) Of course, this would seem to go against the taboo of making any sort of substantial distinction between the sexes and the feminist outcry for reproductive rights and the indispensability of contraceptives in asserting female dignity. In the United States, “Chick fil A” CEO Dan Cathy was slammed for voicing personal views supporting traditional marriage.[[7]](#footnote-8)

Cases such as these illustrate the fact that the political correctness wave is the informal yet all encompassing tribunal that governs contemporary censorship in the Western world, what is and is not allowed to be said. This said, however, for all its paranoia on things deemed offensive and problematic to say, there are nonetheless many important issues that the political correctness force seems to overlook or fail to address. It is clear that the censorship culture is very active in the form of stifling and demonizing certain views that dissent to a pervasive ideology that now serves the function of a tribunal. In the face of this, one must do honest efforts to attempt to expose this ideological regime and the condemnation it effects, if indeed its particular *modus operandi* is suspect. Dissent in these scenarios would seem to take the form of refusing to be quiet, refusing to be denied a platform—if not in NUS, then in the public space at large. Our example of the pervasiveness of sexuality in the portrayal of women in advertisement is an example of something that may reasonably be found objectionable but that nonetheless falls through the nets of contemporary censorship, as something not deemed offensive or harmful in the sense that Erdoğan’s upholding motherhood has been deemed to be. This example, however, is by no means isolated. A main purpose of this essay is to expose the reader to the inconsistency of contemporary censorship. Our particular examples are not conclusive; their purpose, rather, is to inform the reader of cases like these and of the fact that many more can still be found, and to exhort him that this inquiry is worthwhile. If nothing is to be done, then a society’s people become subject—whether they agree with it or not—to an ideological regime that is hard to identify but nonetheless ever at work. Moreover, whether one would agree with the views praised by the PC ideology, she must nonetheless open her eyes to the fact that the censorship at work today is not an honest one, and is rather one that, through something in the nature of an ideological agenda, seems to discriminate between views and phenomena worth censoring or not.

In the face of this double standard or incoherence in censorship, it should be pointed out that dissent does not only take a dramatic form such as it does in the heroic martyrs and figures of dissent (such as Ghandi, Sophie Scholl, and more recently, Boris Nemkov). Dissent on intellectual grounds can be more subtle; even the smallest actions can contribute to exposing an incoherence in the nature of contemporary censorship and the ideology or agendas behind it. Dissent can, as in the case of the exploitative advertisement we have addressed, take the form of raising awareness at the local policy level, as many policy makers either are ignorant or find unimportant many issues where censorship might duly come into play. To put it in other terms, we as a people should care enough to voice our disagreements, whatever they may be, for this is the only way awareness can be raised and leaders and policy makers in turn be themselves pressured into caring about relevant issues that nonetheless fall through the nets of censorship. Moreover, in voicing disagreement, we also come to challenge the validity of a political correctness agenda that has pervaded public discourse in the Western world and increasingly serves as a censorship tribunal dictating what is to be praiseworthy and allowed and what is to be condemned and denied platform. Finally, this should come as an especially pressing concern to us Westerners if we are to boast ourselves members of democratic societies, or else we will be forced with the question of what exactly forming part of such a society is actually worth.

1. That holds that anything falling under a certain criteria is to be considered offensive [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. What the ideological disagreement with transgenderism has been labeled [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. Ditum, Sara. ""No Platform" Was Once Reserved for Violent Fascists. Now It's Being Used to Silence Debate." *New Statesman*. N.p., 18 Mar. 2014. Web. 05 June 2015. <http://www.newstatesman.com/sarah-ditum/2014/03/when-did-no-platform-become-about-attacking-individuals-deemed-disagreeable>. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Ibid. That “(…) by positing gender as fixed it flies in the face of feminism”. In other words, arguing that a female brain may have been born in a male body or vice versa, transgenderism places an objective dimension to differences between the brains of men and women, thus collapsing much of the gender ideology that attempts to blur such a distinction. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/nov/25/impossible-laugh-appalling-sexism-turkish-president-recep-tayyip-erdogan [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. McGregor, Jena. "Chick-fil-A CEO Dan Cathy Steps into Gay-marriage Debate." *Washington Post*. The Washington Post, 19 July 2012. Web. 05 June 2015.

   <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-leadership/post/chick-fil-a-president-dan-cathy-bites-into-gay-marriage-debate/2012/07/19/gJQACrvzvW\_blog.html>. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)