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Abstract

The debate over political correctness and the repression of speech has experienced a resurgence in the 2016 election season. “Political correctness is killing people,” Senator Ted Cruz remarked in December 2015. This thesis explores the liberal justification for the repressing politically incorrect speech and challenges the association of expressive freedom with truth, a position linked to John Stuart Mill’s philosophy of liberty and George Orwell’s denunciation of political speech. Reflecting contemporary postmodern views on language and liberation, I ultimately defend political correctness as a way to reflect social stigmatization, render stigmatized words more visible, and enhance linguistic agency.

Keywords

political correctness, PC, philosophy of language, Mill, words, stigmatize

Disciplines

Ethics and Political Philosophy | Philosophy | Philosophy of Language

Comments

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A Defense of Political Correctness

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I.

“Political correctness is killing people.” On December 15th, 2015, at a GOP presidential debate, Senator Ted Cruz uttered those words to cap off an inspired tirade against the Obama administration’s handling of the threat of terrorism at the hands of Islamic extremists (Guest). The 2016 U.S. presidential election has created a resurgence of the debate around political correctness (PC), and Senator Ted Cruz delivered the bold condemnation quoted above a month and a half before narrowly defeating Donald Trump to win the Iowa Caucuses.

According to Cruz, the Obama administration, out of a desire to avoid offending Muslims, blinded itself to reality by refusing to adequately name the threat of Islamic extremism. He made his comments in the wake of the December 2nd shooting that took place in San Bernardino, California (“San Bernardino Shooting Updates”). “It’s not a lack of competence that is preventing the Obama administration from stopping these attacks. It is political correctness,” said Cruz (Guest).

Before I dive into Cruz’s comments and the world of philosophy and politics operating underneath it, I must give an account of this thesis’s trajectory. First and foremost, I will be entering into a conversation about the repression of language. I am interested in politically incorrect language, but I will not be accumulating a list of politically incorrect words. Some specific examples will be used to flesh out the philosophical and political implications of the PC debate, but trying to identify any and all politically incorrect words is not my aim. The words I am curious about are the ones that would cause heads to turn in a social setting. These are not words and phrases that would register as hate speech; they are the words that have been labeled as unsavory and, in the workplace, for example, would be met with scowls and contempt. I am

interested in the philosophical justification of the repression of these words in our society—and I recognize that I am operating within my contemporary, American context.

Wrapped up in Cruz's comments about PC is a position about expressive freedom and truth that goes back to John Stuart Mill's philosophy of liberty. In this paper, I will trace that philosophy through Mill to George Orwell and return to current politicians on both sides of the political spectrum. I will seek to refute the relationship between expression and truth put forward by these thinkers through the ideas of a number of philosophers following in the wake of Michel Foucault. Ultimately, I will defend PC as a vehicle of social stigmatization that at once makes words more visible and unsavory. PC yields an agency that would otherwise escape us.

Cruz sees the problem in the following way: Obama, or the Obama administration and the Department of Homeland Security, thought it would be inappropriate to monitor the online presence of the female attacker in the San Bernardino attacks because doing so would be politically incorrect, and, as a result, American lives that could have been saved were lost. The ways in which the Obama administration failed to successfully monitor online threats are not important here. Furthermore, Cruz's condemnation of how the Obama administration handled the situation is equally unimportant here.

Even if the problem Cruz sees is merely a perceived problem, his comments tap into a dire concern that many Americans have about the impact PC has on political freedom. The PC debate has been around since the 1960s. The specific language of PC can be traced back to the New Left in the '60s and their translations of Maoist texts (Allan 91). By the 1980s, conservatives had adopted the term "political correctness" as a means of disparaging liberals and liberal policies—especially affirmative action (Allan 92).

A. Some History and Mill's Expressive Freedom

The full-scale PC debate peaked in the early 1990s, becoming visible to a wide American audience. In 1991, *The New York Times* published an article by Richard Bernstein called “The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct” (Schwartz 112). The PC debate flourished in the years following the publication of Bernstein’s article but fizzled toward the end of the 1990s (Allan 91). Since then, the conversations surrounding PC have fallen out of the public sight depending on the social and political landscape of the times.

Longstanding questions about the censorship of language and its justification are at the root of the PC debate, and the philosophical underpinnings of the arguments for and against PC tie into many questions about the connections between language and political freedom. These questions will be fleshed out in time, but before moving on, it seems reasonable to pare away some of the history and the political energy wrapped up in PC to give the simplest definition of what is meant today by PC. In the face of political injustices, PC blazes the trail for righting those injustices by managing what can and cannot be said in the public sphere.

A culture’s lexical sphere is always in flux, and by categorizing in-words and out-words, PC hopes to point culture toward greater political freedom for more people. Repressing the use of whatever set of out-words falls into the sights of PC is the cost of advancing the political freedoms of those the out-words have marginalized over the course of history.

In John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*, Mill argues for a robust political freedom that democratizes political authority. He is wary of governmental tyranny, a tyranny of the minority, where the few rule over the many without taking into consideration the wellbeing of the many. This gives way to “self-government” where the people govern themselves. But Mill is also wary of a “tyranny of the majority,” in which a minority is unable to pursue their political ends

because of the control of the majority. So, although he argues for a democratized political authority, he recognizes that the liberal governments he imagines will have issues to overcome.

The essay is a bastion of liberalism, and the essence of the project stands categorically opposed to the repressive nature of censorship and PC. The second chapter of the essay addresses freedom of thought and expression, and Mill argues outrightly against any and all suppression of opinions. “If all mankind minus one, were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person, than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind” (Mill 53). Mill argues that no matter how many people hold a certain opinion, no group is ever justified in silencing a group that holds a differing opinion, and in fact, the group that does the silencing visits a great injustice on themselves when they silence a differing opinion.

“The peculiar evil of silencing the expression of an opinion is, that it is robbing the human race; posterity as well as the existing generation; those who dissent from the opinion, still more than those who hold it” (Mill 53). This distinction gives way for the two-pronged defense that Mill argues for in this chapter of *On Liberty*.

“If the opinion is right, they are deprived of the opportunity of exchanging error for truth” (Mill 53). In this scenario, brushing up against the differing opinion allows for the exchanging of the incorrect opinion with the correct one. This is obviously seen as a substantial boon. “If wrong, they lose, what is almost as great a benefit, the clearer perception and livelier impression of truth, produced by its collision with error” (Mill 53). In this scenario, brushing up against the differing opinion is helpful because, although the differing opinion is wrong, the correct opinion is polished and enhanced by having asserted itself as correct against the incorrect position.

The bulk of the chapter provides an in-depth defense of the two positions articulated in

the passage quoted above. The first half of the defense argues that belief in a certain opinion can only be justifiably held if the belief is also maximally opened up to differing beliefs. Here, as in the first part of the passage quoted above, the differing belief is the correct belief—or the more correct belief. By refusing to allow an oppositional belief to be heard, one makes an “assumption of infallibility” (Mill 59).

The assumption of infallibility has historically stifled dialogue, which has resulted in the prolonged subscription to unreasonable opinions. The unwillingness to interface with new, differing opinions has kept people tied to governmental structures that have created tyrannical concentration of authority. Recognizing the fallibility of prevailing beliefs and the potential truth of opposing beliefs allows for the interchange of thought and expression Mill seeks to create.

The second prong of his defense has to do with allowing incorrect opinions to “collide” with the prevailing, correct opinion. He writes, “though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of the truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied” (Mill 82). This passage helps to reveal Mill’s larger understanding of truth.

A specific belief is not true or false, but a specific belief might be *closer or farther from the truth* than another belief, so the ability to have an open discourse about the merits of beliefs, especially opposing beliefs, is the foundation for Mill’s notion of rich expressive freedom. Epistemologically, an assumption of fallibility is the jumping off point, and from there, Mill describes how best to move through a world rich with opposing beliefs. This way of approaching opinion should be replaced by a perspectival approach where any certain belief is opened up to as much opposition as possible, so that the belief can either overcome the positions

opposing it and become enhanced, or it can give way to one of the more correct beliefs in opposition to it.

To summarize, as far as Mill is concerned, there is no reason to ever silence an opposing belief. Either it is more correct than the prevailing belief, in which case it should be adopted to replace the prevailing belief, or it is less correct than the prevailing belief, in which case it will serve to move the prevailing belief closer to the truth.

This canonical defense of rich expressive freedom sets the stage for the heated discussions of PC and the philosophical implications of PC. The ideas fleshed out above create the foundation for liberalism, and philosophies of liberty like Mill's push against the stigmatization and repression of language. This stigmatization and repression operate as part of a system of silencing opposing beliefs that stymies collective intellectual progress. The risk of silencing a certain belief is intimately wrapped up in the careful maintenance of what can and cannot be said, and even if the social force of PC *accidentally* silences beliefs by dancing around certain language, it restricts liberty.

B. Taking Expressive Freedom Further with Orwell

Moving next to the work of George Orwell will bring the PC discussion into a more modern context. It will become clear that the stakes remain the same. The great fear in *On Liberty* of silencing ideas is one echoed in Orwell's concerns about the state of the English language. Orwell is also greatly perturbed by the impact language can have on political freedom.

Orwell's 1946 essay "Politics and the English Language" is a touchstone in the conversation about language and political freedom. Scholars of PC often point to Orwell as an early voice weighing in on the effects language can have in the political sphere. The beginning of the essay is a treatise against certain tendencies in English. Orwell wants to rid the English

language of “dying metaphors,” “pretentious diction,” “meaningless words,” and any other practices that make the language less concise and accessible. These linguistic ills inform the discussion that takes place later in his essay on political language.

Orwell describes the state of political language as one plagued by “euphemism, question-begging, and sheer cloudy vagueness” (Orwell 281). Orwell’s charge against obfuscated language is that obfuscation very successfully masks the illicit implications hiding underneath a phrase’s ornate linguistic wrappings. Orwell sees euphemism as a form of obfuscation, so euphemism is a device used “when there is a gap between one’s real and one’s declared aims” (Orwell 282). According to Orwell, the purpose of these devices is to shield the truth from the masses and to protect politicians from taking responsibility for what they say.

“If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought. A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation, even among people who should know better” (Orwell 282). In this passage, Orwell characterizes these bad habits as if they are a contagious disease destroying the integrity of the English language. Orwell admittedly defends some liberal political positions in the essay, but that is less important than the broad argument he makes about language. Orwell’s clarion call is “tell it like it is.”

This sentiment is picked up by conservatives to cast PC as a totalitarian regime of language. In the early stages of the PC debate, PC was equated to any number of authoritarian political practices (Allan 93). The most common ones branded PC as a newfangled, liberal McCarthyism. This characterization of PC is aided by another Orwellian invention, Newspeak, the language created and propagated by the Party in Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four*. The project of Newspeak is to condense language and to essentially prohibit people from political dissension (Allan 93). The idea of Newspeak and its power to silence certain political voices is the hidden

antagonist of “On Liberty” and other philosophies of liberty like it.

Although the language of Newspeak is extraordinarily concise, which might make it seem desirable considering Orwell’s position in “Politics and the English Language,” the ultimate goal of Newspeak is complete cloudiness. The language indoctrinates people into a hyper-limited lexical sphere, which serves to unite and pacify the masses into submission. To this day, many conservatives make the same claims about the agenda of PC.

Accepting the authoritarian picture of PC might be a challenge, but seeing PC as a form of euphemism might be easier. Euphemism is a particularly effective figure of speech because it simultaneously covers up meaning and redirects attention (Allan 97). It does not merely obfuscate. The redirection of attention is the part of euphemism that most closely ties it to how PC is understood. PC aims “to help remove the stigma of negative social stereotypes by compelling its audience to go beyond the simple content of the message and challenge prejudices embodied in language” (Allan 97). This casts PC in a positive light, but the form of the euphemism is what is important here. Just as a euphemism for death, such as “pass away,” manages to avoid the reality of death and successfully gestures towards a specific differing definition (death as a journey), PC can point away from a harsh reality toward some idealized, redefined future.

The worries about the management of speech and its power to close off intellectual discourse are at the root of Mill’s and Orwell’s positions, and they spill enthusiastically into the world of academia. What started as a conversation about the choosing of canonical texts in academia evolved into the authoritarian picture of PC described earlier (Hughes 79). New focuses on perspectives other than the exclusively Western canon used in most college classes

cropped up, and this movement away from the great books of standard academia was met with varying degrees of trepidation and contempt (Berman 3).

Christopher Hitchens, cited in Hughes's *Political Correctness*, captures the philosophical gravity and the essence of the PC debate when, in 1994, he wrote, "For the first time in American history, those who call for an extension of rights are also calling for an abridgement of speech" (Hughes 5). The first place to turn for a position that argues against the traditional view of liberty put forward by Mill and Orwell is one that addresses freedom of expression directly.

C. The First Alternative Understanding of PC

In his essay, "There's No Such Thing as Free Speech and It's a Good Thing, Too," Stanley Fish argues that unrestricted speech is an illusion and that the social forces that bind communities together necessarily limit and determine what can and cannot be said. He takes aim at the PC conversations surrounding college campuses to flesh out his argument. In a 1991 article written by then president of Yale University, Benno Schmidt, Schmidt argues that freedom ought to be the most important consideration in an "academic community" (Fish 239). Fish sees this as an extreme misunderstanding of how social influences shape communities. Schmidt's language betrays his argument. Language necessarily occurs within a community, and what Schmidt describes is actually communication in a vacuum.

Schmidt calls the would-be-repressed language of PC "obnoxious," which denies the true power of the words being called into question. The politically incorrect language might call sensibilities into question and cause some surface discomfort, but for Schmidt, "the idea that the effects of speech can penetrate to the core—either for good or for ill—is never entertained" (Fish 240).

What Schmidt fails to recognize is the power social interactions have to imbue communication with directive force. According to Fish, “the pervasive pressures and pressurings that come along with any socially organizing activity” are unavoidable and color social interactions constantly (Fish 240). “Expression,” for Schmidt, is “an emission without assertive content,” and this assertive content is necessarily influenced by the surrounding social landscape (Fish 240).

The cries against PC that take the form of Schmidt’s position evoke Mill’s understanding of rich expressive freedom, but they are based on an unsophisticated picture of language in society that fails to see the intrinsically political nature of language incubated in our intersected communities. What Fish arrives at is a position that does not allow language and the politics of community to stand in separate corners of the ring. Fish says, “no class of utterances [is] separable from the world of conduct.” He continues, there are “no ‘merely’ cognitive expressions whose effects can be confined to some prophylactically sealed area of public discourse” (Fish 244).

Fish understands the cost of his argument. The robust freedom advocated for by thinkers like Mill falls away. But Fish recognizes this and sees what is gained as well worth what is lost: “The risk of not attending to hate speech is greater than the risk that by regulating it we will deprive ourselves of valuable voices and insights or slide down the slippery slope toward tyranny” (Fish 245). The risk of not yielding to the lexical demands of PC operates the same way. “PC language deliberately throws down the gauntlet, and challenges us to go beyond the content of the message and acknowledge the assumptions on which our language is operating,” and when the assumptions carried forth in our language were forged in the intersectionally oppressive fires of longstanding kyriarchy, the positive power of PC must not be underestimated

(Allan 97).

What underlies Fish's position is the poststructuralist notion that the world is necessarily mediated by language in its varying forms and that the study of language as a world-constitutive device undergirds the philosophical questions pertaining to language and political freedom.

These questions will be assessed in the following sections.

II.

A. A Case Study in PC

In the fall of 2015, at Gettysburg College, students erupted into a debate about PC. Young Americans for Freedom (YAF), a politically conservative student group on campus, posted flyers in residence halls and the College Union Building that caused uproar amongst students. The flyers delivered the ideology of YAF in fiery rhetoric. They asked, "Do you prefer hugging babies to killing them?" in reference to their pro-life/anti-choice stance on abortion. Another line of the flyer included the term "anchor baby," which elicited many of the most angry responses.

In the aftermath, I thought about claiming responsibility for hanging the flyers. People might have believed that I was carrying out a social experiment to produce fodder for this project. I am not nearly clever or bold enough to put on a show like that, but the conversations that erupted amongst students on campus were incredibly pertinent to my research. As mentioned earlier, the PC debate often flares up on university and college campuses. Students at Gettysburg responded by tearing down the posters and condemning the language used to deliver the message.

The outcry about the use of "anchor baby" on the posters is especially relevant for the PC conversation. I can hear exactly what Ted Cruz would say about being told not to use the term

“anchor baby.” He would say that our unwillingness to “tell it like it is,” our unwillingness to follow Orwell’s instructions, allows for what is an extremely problematic part of how immigration works in our country. Imagine this scenario: a child of foreign parents is born on American soil. Maybe the family flew to America from India solely to have the child born here. The child is granted citizenship, and the family, in time, uses the child’s citizen status to gain citizenship for themselves. If one of that child’s parents then committed some violent crime, Cruz would say the exact same thing he said about the San Bernardino shooting.

Cruz—and Mill, so it would seem—want us to interact with the assertion carried underneath a term like “anchor baby.” People use “anchor baby” because they fear that foreigners are traveling to the United States for the sole purpose of having a child, which, in accordance with birthright citizenship, would grant the child American citizenship. This status could then be used, twenty-one years down the line, to help the family of the child born on American soil attain citizenship for themselves. Despite the degrading nature of the term’s use in practice, “anchor baby” delivers a vivid image of the families taking advantage of American birthright citizenship to advance their immigration status.

We should have thick skin, Mill would say. The issue is birthright citizenship, and the people that use the term are successfully capturing their concerns in their language. And even if that opinion about birthright citizenship is patently false, we must not stifle its expression. Remembering Mill’s exact arguments here is important. Stifling expression runs the risk of silencing an opinion, and silencing an opinion is never beneficial. Prevailing opinions are blocks of wood to be carved down. When we repress expressive freedom, we dull the edges of the differing opinions that are necessary for the prevailing opinion to be further refined.

There is hatred wrapped up in the term “anchor baby”? So be it. There is racially and

ethnically motivated hatred in the world outside of the sphere of language, so why should we prohibit language from carrying that energy? By letting the differing opinions be as sharp as possible, we maximize the possibility for the prevailing opinion to be refined, which is the goal of Mill's vision of expressive freedom. The full force of the opinion about birthright citizenship discussed above relies on rich expressive freedom, and, in sending that opinion—even with its controversial packaging—on a collision course with the prevailing opinion, we have only to gain.

According to the expressive freedom view, the children born in these circumstances anchor their families to an American future that is not theirs. There are means for legally immigrating to America, but taking advantage of the birthright citizenship law is a perversion of the established immigration procedures. And to deny the use of “anchor baby” euphemizes our language and does not do justice to the gravity of this very real perversion in the American immigration system. It is important here to note that the specific content of this position is not a sufficient justification for using “anchor baby.” In fact, the content of the opinion does not really matter. What matters is that we have the freedom to express our opinions in the language that makes them as potent as the real societal concerns they represent linguistically. If the differing opinion is merely to bounce off the prevailing opinion and reinforce the merits of prevailing opinion, that is fine—even if people take offense along the way. Saving people's feelings is not worth the refining power of freely expressed differing opinions.

B. Zooming Out: Opposition on All Sides

To be honest, I may be granting this defense of PC more sophistication than it deserves. The politicians that shake their fists at PC are merely gesturing towards the defense of expressive freedom that I lay out above. Nonetheless, their positions about PC make it necessary to

understand Mill's arguments about liberty. The conversation is not limited to members of the GOP party either. In September of 2015, at a town hall meeting on education, President Obama delivered a sentiment that closely echoes Mill's arguments (Ross).

President Obama was responding to a question about the environments at liberal colleges, and he said, "I've heard of some college campuses where they don't want to have a guest speaker who is too conservative, or they don't want to read a book if it had language that is offensive to African Americans or somehow sends a demeaning signal towards women" (Ross). The idea that President Obama is opposed to is the idea that "when you become students at colleges, you have to be coddled and protected from different points of view" (Ross).

This is where Obama delivers the sentiment most aligned with Mill's philosophy of liberty: "Anybody who comes to speak to you and you disagree with, you should have an argument with them, but you shouldn't silence them by saying you can't come because I'm too sensitive to hear what you have to say" (Ross). The president is voicing the very concern Mill voiced in *On Liberty*. We must not be too sensitive to hear the differing positions that will help us refine our own positions.

Even if the evil being named is not PC explicitly, the fear is still the same. Those in opposition to PC appear across party lines, and it is important to understand the scope of the discontentment that surrounds PC. Later in this section, I will employ some of the arguments of Jung Min Choi and John W. Murphy that appear in their 1992 book *The Politics and Philosophy of Political Correctness*. In a chapter on conservative ideology, they argue that philosophies specific to conservatism set up the dispute between conservatives and PC. I will argue that their positions on conservative ideology apply to American politics writ large, and the president's remarks quoted above serve as a good primer for that part of my work. Today, people hold

hands across party lines to condemn PC, and I will argue that their bipartisan condemnation comes from the same epistemological misstep.

Before I get into the work of Choi and Murphy, I will take a moment to reiterate the goals of PC. The stigmatization of certain language serves to blaze the trails for the political freedoms of those to which the stigmatized language refers. One can be concerned about how the Fourteenth Amendment should be applied today, but most illegal immigrants in America have children after several years of living in the country (Constable). So using “anchor baby” gestures towards a manufactured manipulation of the system—it is a fear of a nonexistent evil. And when the weight of its derogatory nature is tacked on, it becomes easier to understand how PC can stigmatize language to seek social change.

C. Another Alternative View

In a 2015 article in the Washington Post, former NBA superstar, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, gives a spirited defense of PC. This unlikely defender of PC takes aim at Ted Cruz and the other GOP presidential candidates, all of whom have expressed anti-PC sentiments at one point or another. According to Abdul-Jabbar, examples like the San Bernardino shooting and the hypothetical birthright citizenship situation I described are the rarest, most extreme examples of PC, and cherry-picking those examples is merely a tactic to avoid addressing larger, systemic issues. Abdul-Jabbar writes, “Anti-political-correctness rhetoric serves as a clever tool for politicians who wish to distract voters from the real issues (and their lack of solutions) by tapping into their darkest fears about those who are different than themselves” (Abdul-Jabbar).

The example that Abdul-Jabbar uses closely parallels the conversation around a term like “anchor baby.” “Latino immigration has had less effect on employment than factories that moved abroad, weakened labor unions, and recurring recessions,” writes Abdul-Jabbar. “So

while we're told to focus on building a massive wall to keep out immigrants, the real architects of job loss and economic instability continue unaffected," he says (Abdul-Jabbar). We are a country of immigrants, yet we otherize Hispanic immigrants because our social hierarchy relies on the existence of inferior referents for our arbitrary superiority.

Abdul-Jabbar says that "PC's opponents point to its most extreme examples to argue for doing exactly what we did before political correctness showed us the racism, misogyny, and homophobia embedded in our language: Nothing" (Abdul-Jabbar). Abdul-Jabbar, Mill, Orwell, and Fish might agree that there is great power in language. But understanding our language as "embedded" with the cultural baggage carried forward by decades of political oppression places Abdul-Jabbar firmly in Fish's camp.

There are two chief complaints operating in Abdul-Jabbar's position—and in the response to the use of "anchor baby" that I articulated earlier. The first is an empirical one, and the second is an epistemological, sociolinguistic one. It is important to understand how defenses of PC operate within these two realms. Illuminating the lived experiences of the immigrants that come to America illegally to show that the term "anchor baby" does not accurately describe what it claims to describe is one way of defending political correctness.

People who use the term "anchor baby" believe the state of affairs in the world (or America, in this case) to be a certain way, so they use the term "anchor baby." To combat this illegitimate position, that person is shown the real state of affairs, a state that contradicts the one that legitimized the use of "anchor baby," thus delegitimizing the use of "anchor baby."

Unsettling the view of the world that allowed for "anchor baby" to be seen as warranted will solve the problem. Voila! We can now happily move on from "anchor baby." This is often the work that is done when "offensive" language is used in the public sphere.

The complicated thing is that wrapped up in this approach to defending PC is a relationship between world and language that the sociolinguist approach to defending PC inverts. Instead of prioritizing states of affairs and asking for our language to properly reflect those states of affairs, the sociolinguistic approach to defending PC prioritizes our language itself. This is the move that ultimately turns the discussion toward Fish and philosophies of language more in line with the thought of Foucault. This move also foreshadows the epistemological misstep that I referred to earlier.

D. Towards a More Nuanced View of Language and Society

The PC debate has been raging for decades, but Jung Min Choi and John W. Murphy's *The Politics and Philosophy of Political Correctness* offers one of the few truly philosophical texts devoted to understanding this debate. One of their first goals, a goal I mentioned earlier, is to unpack the ideology of American conservative politics to explain why conservatism finds itself at war with PC.

According to Choi and Murphy, "Most important at this juncture is the assumption made by conservatives that a belief in objectivity is justified" (Choi 32). The sociolinguistic defense of PC grants us a more tenable, perspectival epistemology. Objectivity is the goal of those opposed to PC, and objectivity is the basis of Mill's conception of liberty. Obviously, Mill grants the existence of differing opinions, but there is one objectively correct opinion, and society should bend towards that one opinion. Furthermore, much of Choi and Murphy's critique is applied to ideology broadly.

Choi and Murphy, channeling Habermas, say that ideologies work to "[attract] attention away from the exercise of power" (Choi 32). They say, "An ideology is successful when policies and social arrangements, for example, are envisioned to be logical and necessary, when

their legitimacy, in other words, is understood to be based on a ‘universalistic structure and appeal to generalizable interests’” (Choi 32). They are still critiquing conservatism, but their turn toward ideology in general is important.

At the time they published their book, almost all of the opposition to PC was coming from conservatives. It is still more concentrated in that camp now, but people all along the political spectrum find themselves distrustful of PC. Choi and Murphy give us a way of understanding ideology in conjunction with the epistemological concerns that arise in the PC debate.

In a later section on the postmodern alternative to conservatism, Choi and Murphy deliver the crux of the more sophisticated picture of epistemology and language that works to counteract the problems of conservatism and ideology in general.

Existence is ‘decentered’ because of this focus on interpretation. For example, institutions are projected outside of the sterile realm of administration and understood to consist of a myriad of interpersonal practices. No conception of social reality, therefore, can be extricated from the web of surrounding cultural considerations. Accordingly norms, roles, or laws, for example, have a purpose, because they are implicated in the pragmatic thrust of language. As a result, the metaphysics sought by conservatives cannot be sustained, because of the pervasiveness of interpretation; all knowledge and order must arise from within interpretation. There is nowhere else to turn, given the ubiquity of language use (Choi 76).

The “focus on interpretation” that they refer to is at the heart of Fish’s defense of PC, and it follows from the traditions of deconstruction, postmodernism, and new historicism.

“Like all ideologies, the claims made by conservatives have a historical origin and, thus, are contingent. The legitimacy of conservatism, stated simply, is derived from agreement, consent, power, persuasion, or some combination of these elements” (Choi 33). Is that not also true of ideology in general? According to Choi and Murphy, “An effective ideology cannot be undermined by simply claiming that it is false or by producing counter-examples. Because of the

asymmetry that is present between an ideology and its opponents, strategies such as these are futile” (Choi 33). This quality of ideology is what makes potent its forces of “agreement, consent, power, and persuasion,” so the critique originally made in reference to just conservatism is true of other ideologies as well.

Along the way, especially during the time Choi and Murphy were writing in the ‘90s, conservative cultural critics have taken shots at PC. Dinesh D’Souza and Roger Kimball are two such critics, and both of their positions about PC reflect an unwillingness to yield to the philosophies of the modern era. Their problem is “that the existence of literal meaning and, presumably, reality is denied by these philosophies” (Choi 36). Objectivity as a possibility falls away, and meaning, in its entirety, falls with it—according to these critics, at least.

Ultimately, Choi and Murphy’s critique holds true for ideology in general, and it readily applies to those who oppose PC. The GOP candidates, the president, and those who base their fears of PC on a desire for a robust, Millian expressive freedom place themselves on precarious epistemological footing. Mill’s position does not grant absolute truth to certain opinions, but the entire philosophy is based on proximity to absolute truth. Mill hoped that the opinion that emerges from open discussion is the one that most closely aligns with *the truth*, and we cannot limit expression for fear that other opinions will be stunted because that only inhibits our ability to refine our opinion—refine it so it can become closer to *the truth*. But this is the very objectivity that we can never access.

In the section on postmodernism, Choi and Murphy write, “Like a rhizome, a community has no center or apparent *telos*, and yet neither is necessarily chaotic. The point is that order can be polyvalent and does not have to be objectified to guarantee its survival” (Choi 75). This is ultimately what those who oppose PC fail to recognize, and the impact can be substantial. In

demanding one objectively right position, the assemblage of perspectival interpretations is undermined. Language is the crux of this de-centered yet not chaotic web of interpretations, so fighting a war for language is also a fight for the only reality to which we have access.

To return to the issue that opened this section, should the administration of Gettysburg College prohibit students from using the term “anchor baby” on college grounds? I am not advocating for that, no. Instead, what is possible if we move forward with a better understanding of how language and interpretation operate to create our historically dependent social sphere is a power to adjust away from the political positions—taken to be objectively true—lorded over by dominant cultures throughout history. People within the campus community have the power to stigmatize “anchor baby” and redirect focus toward political change that will have lasting impact for immigrants living in the country illegally.

Should the government prohibit Americans from saying certain words and phrases that are deemed offensive? Except for cases when hate speech specifically incites violence or injury, the First Amendment will swiftly provide an answer to that question (“Facts and Case Summary - Snyder v. Phelps”). But the forces of PC are social. The social stigmatization of certain words delivers the message that you may be able to legally say what you want, but society will hold you accountable. It goes back to what Christopher Hitchens said. Hitchens might have seen this stigmatization to be an overly sensitive culture of shunning, but one can expect to be shunned by society for consistently using the word “fag” as a generalized insult. And would anyone condemn society for that?

This seems like an obvious part of inter-subjective, postmodern society. We recognize the overlaps in our interpretative systems, and by making it taboo to say certain things, a message is sent about the intended direction of the body politic. It would be irresponsible to do

nothing but correct our language, but righting our language can allow for the next phase of political liberation for traditionally marginalized subsets of a body politic.

One of the biggest problems with this position—and it is a big problem—is the need that arises for a means of measuring political liberation. The out-words are stigmatized to hoist up the political realities—the lived social experiences—of those referred to by the out-words. But we run into challenges if the only way to gauge the success of PC (and its stigmatization of certain language) is to prove that those political realities have improved. I separated the epistemological aspects of the debate from the empirical ones, but if the success of a shifted epistemological perspective can only be measured using empirical means that seems like a less important distinction to make.

In the next section, I will focus on the forces of stigmatization in the social sphere, the politics of language, and language as liberation to address the issues I bring forward in the previous paragraph. Situating the discussion in modern American politics does not do justice to the philosophical implications of the PC debate, and looking to other places and other histories to understand how repression operates and can operate in language will illuminate my argument.

III.

Up until this point, I have done a lot of work to explain two distinct understandings of truth that carry weight in the PC conversation. The philosophies of language that accompany these different approaches to understanding truth are a big part of the debate around PC. I have tracked the understanding of liberty and expressive freedom in Mill through Orwell and many of today's politicians—both conservative and liberal. This view holds truth and language in two separate spheres and says that we must work to make our language reflect our reality.

Along the way, I have motioned towards an alternative view. The focus on language as more important, if not supremely important, that arose in the twentieth century is important, but much of the conversation about PC that happens in the public sphere is fueled by the Mill/Orwell/politician's view. The alternative view inseparably bonds language and truth. It relies on the interpretative nature of all experience to prioritize language, as a means of understanding the flux of existence, reality, and what is left of truth when all of that is considered.

Starting first with Fish and moving through the responses to the “anchor baby” case study, I have tried to show how this alternative view problematizes the traditional way of understanding PC. First, with Foucault, I will explain some of the most important philosophies that have led to the privileging of language in philosophical discourse. This does not get us out of the woods though. Privileging language does not automatically mean PC is good and worthy of defending. If we understand language—and our ability to influence and evolve our language to change our social realities—as primarily important, could not PC move us backwards by obscuring our language? The questions become less empirical and more about how attention is being paid to our language.

Second, I will move to some postcolonial thinkers that follow in the wake of Foucault. When thinking about how attention to language affects social realities, these thinkers will be extraordinarily illuminating. Understanding how to best balance the words provided by our language or languages is important for conceptualizing the PC debate and how PC can steer us into a more responsible language—and toward more a more just society.

Foucault is a good jumping off point because he gives us a clearer picture of the move away from objective truth into interpretative, language based reality construction. His

philosophy of discursive systems gives way to a number of thinkers interested in the politics of language. Discursive communities are energetic, self-contained entities, and their power to exclude reinforces societal hierarchies. Stigmatizing certain words gives a community the otherwise absent agency to shape the social sphere against those forces of exclusion.

A. Foucault to the Rescue

In *The Discourse on Language*, Foucault describes the complicated relationship that exists between language and society. Foucault's ideas about the necessarily interpretative creation of reality are at the root of the relationship he sees between language and society. "Speech is no mere verbalization of conflicts and systems of domination, [...] it is the very object of man's conflicts," Foucault writes (Foucault 231). This poses a direct alternative to the understanding of language and truth provided by Mill, and it even brings societal and political issues into the forefront.

Foucault recognizes that, "as a proposition, the division between true and false," a division that is foundation for Mill's thought, "is neither arbitrary, nor modifiable, nor institutional, nor violent," but Foucault is not focused on truth (Foucault 233). He is focused on knowledge. He relinquishes our will to truth—our will to absolute truth, I would say—and focuses on how access to knowledge, our "will to knowledge," has been directed. Foucault states, "We may well discern something like a system of exclusion (historical, modifiable, institutionally constraining) in the process of development" of the will to knowledge (Foucault 233). He also believes that "this will to knowledge [...] tends to exercise a sort of pressure, a power of constraint" (Foucault 234).

Speech is not just a representative mode for Foucault. To justify this understanding of language, Foucault points to the exclusionary and prohibitive forces of language that function in

societies. As a society, our will to knowledge enacts a number of exclusionary forces that maintain the divisions needed for our society to remain intact. The best way to understand this point is by understanding how Foucault sees this exclusion functioning in education. He states, “Every educational system is a political means of maintaining or of modifying the appropriation of discourse, with the knowledge and the powers it carries with it” (Foucault 239).

Knowledge is powerful *and political*, and Foucault is describing the social pressures that keep people from talking about certain things, keep people from using the words of certain discourses, and create our divided social structures via language. “What is an educational system,” Foucault asks, “if not a ritualization of the word; if not a qualification of some fixing of roles for speakers” (Foucault 240).

I wish to utilize Foucault’s work here to understand how social pressures have been employing language as a means of exclusion and marginalization throughout history. It might seem like this claim comes out of the blue, but the work done in the following sections—derived from (or coming from) postcolonial thought—will crystalize Foucault’s admittedly abstract position. Before that, I would like to point out how Foucault’s ideas about social pressure can be seen to carry over into the PC debate.

The exclusion and prohibition that Foucault is talking about is not the repression of language on which PC is founded. He is talking about how access to discourse and language creates our organized social interactions. This aspect of Foucault’s thought is usually seen as a negative thing. We imagine the ways in which limited access to the culture discourse also limits cultural relevancy, visibility, and political realities. While these might be very real in practice, I am most interested in Foucault’s thought in the abstract—for the systems it reveals.

Foucault is describing a system of language repression that operates automatically in organized societies. This system of language repression might have those negative results that I mentioned in the previous paragraph, but more importantly, this understanding of language and society shows quite plainly how discourse, and thus social organization broadly, is already operating using the repression of language. I recognize that the repression that comes with Foucault's exclusion and prohibition is somewhat passive—at least it is more passive than the categorization of in-words and out-words that comes with PC—and I belabor this point only to show that the repression of language is not something foreign to the construction of our social spheres. In fact, it is the very vehicle that forms and perpetuates them.

B. The Postcolonial Thought of Fanon and Achebe

An important postcolonial thinker, Frantz Fanon, picks up this idea in “The Negro and Language.” Fanon was born in Martinique under French colonial rule, and his mid-twentieth century writings addressed the social and political effects of French rule on Afro-Caribbean nations. The thought of Fanon, and the other postcolonial thinkers I reference, will serve to bolster the position of Foucault that I purposefully left in the abstract. Fanon says that “To speak means to be in a position to use a certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization” (Fanon 419).

“A man who has a language consequently possesses the world expressed and implied by that language,” Fanon writes (Fanon 420). We saw this in terms of education in Foucault. Access to the language of a certain discourse prefigures any ability to access that section of society. Fanon merely expands on this idea with the perspective that comes from living in a colonized nation. For the colonized, the language of the colonizer becomes the means of

ascending to the humanity of the colonizer. In *Antilles*, in the wake of French colonialism, a man “will come closer to being a real human being [...] in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language” (Fanon 419).

Fanon describes a situation when, during a lecture in France, he drew an illuminating comparison between Black and European poetry. A French friend of his praised his insight by saying that, deep down, Fanon is really a white man (Fanon 245). According to his acquaintance, Fanon’s ability to make a salient point and express his position in French vaults him from the lowly incompetence of his race. The attitude of this one person encapsulates Fanon’s experience with language more generally. And in this case, the exclusionary forces of language make impossible the relationship that would grant Fanon his humanity.

The thought of Chinua Achebe on the language of the colonizer jumps off from Fanon’s bleak picture about the nature of language and society after colonization. Fanon mostly fleshes out the dilemmas of using the language of the colonizer, while Achebe takes a position about how a colonized people should move forward as a community of speakers. He argues that a colonized people must use the language of the colonizer to attain liberation. Achebe states, the colonized “should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry [their] peculiar experience” (Achebe 432).

The colonizer only understands the language it forced onto the colonized, and using the language of the oppressor can turn “apparent limitation in language into a weapon of great strength,” according to Achebe (Achebe 432). This is not an unproblematic exercise, but blends together linguistic communities in a way that, I think, Foucault would be proud of. Achebe believes that “the English language will be able to carry the weight of [his] African experience. But it will have to be a new English” (Achebe 433). The idea of the formation of a new English

is where Foucault and postcolonial thought finds its direct import into the PC conversation.

Fanon describes being chastised for reading Marx and using Marx to criticize imperial, Western rule over colonized nations (Fanon 424). Requiring the use of the language of the colonizer is problematic because it seems to validate the inferiority of the colonized, but the reality of the imperialistic hierarchy makes Achebe's goal the most attainable one. Pour your experience into the language of the colonizer to turn the common ground afforded by language into a weapon of liberation, Achebe would say.

Obviously Achebe is not talking about the process of stigmatizing words in social settings to impact the trajectory of language, but the lived experiences of those like Fanon and Achebe show the forces of socialized language in a painfully clear way. In the face of oppression and oppressive language, Achebe resolutely says, "Make a new English." PC calls us to do the same thing. It's not the same process that Achebe describes (making room for the experiences of the colonized by creating a new, English-like language that reflects the hybrid lives of the colonized). But, by stigmatizing words, PC creates a spoken, in-the-atmosphere language with less of the oppressive force than the language we inherited. PC takes Foucault's swirling forces of language and adds a controllable current, one of stigmatization, which creates a new language for our public sphere.

C. Conclusion

With PC and its forces of stigmatization and repression, certain turns of phrase are focused on to bring them into the light of day. When we continue to use the words that would be forced into that group of out-words by PC, we negate the power that we have over our language—and the power that grants to create and recreate our social realities. We are born into a certain linguistic community (into many different ones, in fact), and although we know that

language constantly evolves, we force ourselves into a passivity that we have the power to overcome. PC is not the only means of overcoming this passivity, but it is certainly one way we can influence our language and create a new purposeful English.

These postcolonial thinkers have shown just how real the exclusionary forces of language can be—they play out the often fracturing drama for which Foucault set the stage. I would argue that PC as a form of active language repression can alleviate some of the pressures of passive language repression that operate in the exclusion and prohibition of language that creates and maintains our social spheres. Foucault, Fanon, and Achebe show that repression is a fundamental part of how our social interactions and systems are formed, so why not respond with an active, controlled repression of language? This gives us an agency over our language, and thus our social reality, that would not otherwise have.

When we use our unfiltered, un-dulled language—and all of the words that PC would have stigmatized—we do what Fanon describes when he talked about lifting up our civilizations with our language. We hoist the weight of our civilization on our shoulders and perpetuate what has been a history steeped in oppression. Our current brand of American English constitutes our current American reality, and we must attend to that language to make it possible for social liberation to occur.

There is an argument to be made that certain words, purely for their histories, are just too ugly to utter. This can often be a compelling argument, and my argument does not run counter to this position. There might be situations—or certain words maybe—that lend themselves to this simpler, ethical condemnation of language, but that does not go far enough. The forces of stigmatization serve more broadly, and as a response to the assumed exclusion of Foucault's system of linguistic social construction, they carry more weight. My argument allows for an

understanding of PC as an effective tool of linguistic agency that is founded on a more nuanced picture of the relationship between language and truth.

Another common response to this understanding of PC is the question of the reclamation of ugly words. Many historically destructive and hurtful words have undergone a process of reclamation where the groups initially marginalized by the words have adopted them and repurposed them. I see this as a completely justifiable linguistic practice. It quite clearly returns agency to the groups whose agency was impacted by the use of the words in the first place. But I would argue that stigmatization almost always operates before, or at least alongside, these forces of reclamation.

“Bitch” underwent a process of stigmatization over the past few decades, and has only recently been reclaimed as a term of empowerment. The forces of stigmatization and repression might lessen when a culture’s psyche reorients itself in relation to a certain word and turns toward reclamation, but words are not often reclaimed before they have been focused on and made socially unsavory. Furthermore, the words will also be used in their original senses, which gives stigmatization lingering importance.

Our language communities constitute the empirical part of the equation, the social reality, so adopting a language that purposefully stigmatizes words that allow societal power hierarchies to perpetuate themselves is a way of harnessing the constitutive power of language to affect the lived experiences of those historically pushed to the margins by the dominant culture.

A concern about PC that holds validity after the turn away from Mill and Orwell is the way in which PC hides our unsavory language from us. Could this not also hide the issues PC intends to assuage? I understand this concern, but I do not see stigmatization and repression as a means of making words less visible. In fact, I think PC does exactly the opposite. Everyone

operating in the public sphere should understand why certain words find themselves in the out-group.

They are not being hidden; they are being brought forward for judgment. They are being shown the light of day. Creating this group of out-words through our interaction in the social sphere will bring them more attention. The social interactions that follow might be free of those certain words, but the members of the body politic will understand why they have been stigmatized and why they are only referred to and never used. Removing those words from the social atmosphere does not conceal them; it puts a metaphorical dunce cap on them. It makes them at once more pronounced and unsavory.

Much of the work I have done up until this point has blended the formal, abstract philosophical systems of language and reality with the empirical, political ends that PC attempts to bring about, but the understanding of PC that I lay out in the paragraph above is an extra-ethical understanding of PC. PC might not be sufficient for bringing about social liberation, but the position that I take, a position extending most clearly from Foucault, presents PC as a vehicle for language repression and stigmatization that chips away at the passive, exclusionary discursive communities we inherit by giving us a unique linguistic agency.

We are all swimming in the waters of our language. We did not fill the ocean or start the waves that constantly shift our positions. But the waters are at just the right depth for us to occasionally find footing and maneuver with an agency that feels impossible until we have it. Those moments of direction that we have when our feet hit solid ground must be taken advantage of. PC grants us that maneuverability—that agency. It is a messy unfolding, and it takes patience and humility, but, for better or for worse, PC can empower us to create a new language from the one we were given.

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