

Chilled
PC, Misappropriation, Microaggressions, and Other Forms of Neo-Fascism
By
Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof
June 18, 2017

As I'm sure you've heard by now, there was a shooting this week at a Republican Congressional Baseball team practice in Alexandria, Virginia, resulting in the death of the alleged shooter, and four people being wounded, including House Majority Whip, Steve Scalise. Although this wasn't the first time a gunman has target politicians in one of these mass shootings, it was the first time such an attack targeted a Republican group, and, I trust, people of goodwill everywhere, no matter their political leanings, are united in our contempt of such violence. When I learned the alleged shooter had been a Bernie Sanders' volunteer and was disturbed by Trump's election, I thought this man may have shared some of my liberal beliefs, but he did not share my liberal values. Silencing others through violence, bullying, shaming, or any other means, is not liberal.

Liberal comes from the Latin word meaning "freedom," and being liberal is about people being free, free to speak, free to be who they are, free to believe what they want, free to participate, to work, to exist, to live, and free to move about. History suggests the first step in subjugating others is suppressing freedom of speech. For if speech can be controlled, ideas can be controlled, and if ideas can be controlled, people can be controlled. This is the reason *linguistic colonialism* or *language imperialism* always accompanies the spread of empire, because, as Spanish grammarian, Antonio de Nebrija wrote in 1492, "siempre la lengua fue compañera del imperio,"¹ which means, *language was always the companion of empire*. Or, as British colonialist, Edmund Spencer admitted in 1596, "it hath ever been the use of the Conqueror, to despise the language of the conquered and to force him by all means to learn his [own]."²

This is the reason, after 500 years of British colonialism, English is one of the top three languages in the world, even though England is little more than half the size of California, and why even more people round the globe speak Spanish, though Spain itself is only about as big as Texas. This effort to impose the dominant culture by controlling the language of the oppressed, and, thus, control the conversation, is why the ancient Roman Empire forced Latin upon its subjects, and why Japan imposed its language on those it conquered during the start of the 20th century, and why the Chinese are currently forcing Tibetans to speak Mandarin, and why, in our own modern era, governments in Canada, Brazil, South Africa, Australia, and right here in the United States, forcibly removed indigenous children from their homes and placed them in institutions where they were punished for speaking their native tongue.

¹ Crowley, Tony, "Colonialism and Language," *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the Language Sciences*, ed. P. Hogan, Cambridge, 2008.

² *Ibid.*

This “linguistic genocide,” or, “linguicide,” as it’s sometimes called, is defined as, “the systematic replacement of an indigenous language with the language of an outside, dominant group, resulting in a permanent language shift and the death of the indigenous language.”³ The ramifications of colonial linguicide has been brought to light here in our own community by the efforts of the Salish School of Spokane to preserve and revive the indigenous language here, and, in so doing, to restore its culture. Linguistic colonialism and imperialism, however, haven’t been the only ways dominator cultures have worked to control speech. The Catholic Inquisition was responsible for the persecution and executions of unknown thousands for heresy. *Heresy* comes from the Greek word meaning “choice.” Heretics were simply those who chose to express their own ideas, rather than those imposed by the Church. The founder of our own faith, Michael Servetus was burned at the stake, as were his writings, for speaking about Unitarianism. McCarthyism, in our own nation, is an example of how the U.S. government effectively made it illegal to talk about socialism and worker’s rights. Those convicted by its House Unamerican Activities Committee could be imprisoned, and those suspected of being communist sympathizers were put on a list that made them ineligible to work. In other words, if you said the wrong thing you weren’t allowed to make a living, a form of oppression I personally know too well.

Other ways of controlling speech in our post-colonial era have included deregulating the communications industry by getting rid of the Fairness Doctrine that once required those with broadcast licenses to give equal time to both sides of an issue, and permitting corporations to begin buying up as many media outlets in the same market as they’d like. This has resulted in the advent of extremely biased mediums like Rush Limbaugh and Fox News, which has since become the norm, and to just five corporations controlling the flow of most all our news and information. The Supreme Court’s relatively recent *Citizens United* decision defining multibillion dollar corporations as persons and money as free speech, is another example of making the speech of those in control the dominant language in our society, effectively silencing anyone who is poor. The era of mass incarceration, furthermore, has made the U.S., which still promotes itself as a “free nation,” the most jailed country on Earth, with more people in prison than anywhere else, even though we represent only 5 percent of the global population. This system, which is extremely racist in targeting a gravely disproportionate number of African Americans and other minorities, specifically impacts Democratic voters. Project REDMAP, the GOP’s very successful plan to redistrict voters based on race and politics has given Republicans an unfair advantage, while muzzling the political expression of those who might vote against them.

For the past several years, many states have also been purging thousands of democratic voters from their rolls. Just this week I heard a story on *Democracy Now* explaining how, of the 85 thousand new voter registration forms submitted in Georgia, 40 thousand, mostly belonging to minorities, have vanished without explanation. Voter Registration Groups that complained about the missing records, the report claims, have had their offices raided and been shut down by the FBI. It also reported that Georgia has a list of over 660,000 voters it

³ Isabelle L’eglise, Bettina Migge, “Language and colonialism. Applied linguistics in the context of creole communities,” Marlis Hellinger & Anne Pauwels. *Language and Communication: Diversity and Change. Handbook of Applied Linguistics*, Mouton de Gruyter, pp.297-338, 2007.

claims have been double-counted, simply based upon the fact that someone in another state bares a similar name. Those names, belonging mostly to Democratic voters, have been purged from the voter registry, yet not one of them has ever been charged with voter fraud.

All of this is to point out that controlling the speech of others to maintain power and control comes in many forms, from colonization, to reeducation, to making certain languages or ideas illegal to speak, to suppressing the voices of others through imprisonment and disenfranchisement, and sometimes through violence and murder, like what happened in Virginia this week. But what I am concerned about today is that some of these tactics are being used to silence others by people who claim to share my values.

Last month, after a White Supremacist murdered two men on a train in Portland, it's Democratic Mayor tried to prevent two previously scheduled White Supremacist rallies from taking place a few days later in the name of public safety. It made me wonder how, traumatized as the Portland community must be, Mayor Wheeler's attempt to usurp the 1st Amendment in the name of public safety differs from President Bush signing the Patriot Act into law just a few weeks after 9/11, allowing the government to hack our emails, computers, phones, and financial records without permission, all in the name of national security. This is why the American Civil Liberties Union intervened on behalf of the White Supremacist groups, not because they agree with their despicable ideas, but because, as the ACLU has said in response, "It may be tempting to shut down speech we disagree with, but once we allow the government to decide what we can say, see, or hear, or who we can gather with, history shows us that the most marginalized will be disproportionately censored and punished for unpopular speech... If we allow the government to shut down speech for some, we all will pay the price down the line."⁴

A day after the horror in Portland, just a few miles north in Olympia, Washington, some student protestors at Evergreen State College began demanding biology professor Bret Weinstein be fired for being a racist. As I understand it, the controversy relates to a tradition at Evergreen called, "Day of Absence," during which its students and faculty of color stay off campus, firstly, as a symbolic gesture to point out systems of racism cannot exist without those they oppress, and, secondly, to meet elsewhere to discuss ways of making the college more supportive of all students. This year, however, a University administrator suggested the white students and faculty should stay away on the annual Day of Absence instead, which Professor Weinstein objected to, stating that, "On a college campus, one's right to speak—or to be—must never be based on skin color."⁵ Weinstein, at least temporarily, has moved his classes off campus for his own safety and that of his students, and has had to move his family into hiding.

⁴ <http://www.wweek.com/news/2017/05/29/aclu-of-oregon-says-mayor-ted-wheelers-attempt-to-quash-alt-right-rallies-violates-the-first-amendment/>

⁵ <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2017/05/30/escalating-debate-race-evergreen-state-students-demand-firing-professor>

I don't know much more about the matter than this. I don't know if Professor Weinstein may have said things in the past that further justify these accusations of him being a racist. What I do know is that this incident will have a chilling effect on other professors who will now be afraid to speak freely about race related issues, and, this, I believe, is partially the reason for these protests, to reinforce awareness that such dissent will not be tolerated, which to me is a form of fascism. This past April violence broke out at Auburn University as students there protested a speech by White Nationalist Richard Spencer. Some prevented him from being heard by shouting him down. Something similar happened at U.C. Berkeley a month earlier when another White Nationalist, Milo Yiannopoulos was invited to speak there, the very birthplace of the free speech movement. And in March, dozens of students at Middlebury College in Vermont silenced the speech of conservative political scientist, Charles Murray.

In all these instances, those being protested held views I personally deplore, but, like the ACLU, like those who hold liberal values everywhere, I cannot condone silencing the voices of people I disagree with. Yet, what I find most disturbing about all of this, as Emory University's distinguished professor of politics, Harvey Klehr puts it, these instances are coming "embarrassingly from the left,"⁶ from those, whom I would say, may share some of my goals, but, when it comes to silencing others, cannot share my liberal values.

Perhaps silencing others in the name of Political Correctness has the most chilling effect of all. In his recent essay on the subject, author William Deresiewicz, a contributor to *The New York Times*, *The Atlantic*, *Harper's*, *The Nation*, *The New Republic*, and *The American Scholar*, whose work has been praised by the likes of Chris Hedges, and who considers himself a liberal, says that many college students he's spoken with say they often feel too afraid to speak freely among their own peers. "Everybody felt oppressed, as they put it, by the 'PC police,' everybody, that is, except for those whom everybody else regarded as members of the PC police."⁷ Some, for example, were told they can no longer use the word "crazy" because it stigmatizes the mentally ill. One student he spoke to was publicly shamed, or "called out," as the PC culture puts it, for cultural misappropriation after wearing a pair of moccasins. "So much of political correctness," he says, "is not about justice or creating a safe environment; it's about power,"⁸ and that those who use it to justify shaming others into silence are not dismantling systems of hierarchy and supremacy, they are only inverting them. "Unlike the campus protesters of the 1960s, today's student activists are not expressing countercultural views," Deresiewicz says, "They are expressing the exact views of the culture in which they find themselves... If you want to find the counterculture on today's elite college campuses, you need to look for the conservative students."⁹

The appropriation of a marginalized group's culture by members of the privileged culture is understandably troubling. The problem I have, however, is there is no consistency about what precisely this means. For some it's wearing jewelry or clothing, for others it's telling

⁶ <http://www.cnn.com/2017/04/20/us/campus-free-speech-trnd/index.html>

⁷ Deresiewicz, William, *On Political Correctness: Power, Class, and the New Campus Religion*, The American Scholar, Sponsored by Phi Beta Kappa, 4-17-17.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

stories, or practicing rituals, or performing music, song, or dance. For some it means properly attributing and recognizing the cultural source of such inspiration, and for others all such use is fundamentally wrong. While most violations seem to do with whites appropriating culture from African Americans and Native Americans, I wonder why it isn't problematic for whites to practice Buddhism for the same reasons, given the Japanese Internment Camps during WWII, which robbed Japanese Americans from their wealth and property, the ramifications of which their descendants still suffer. The same is true of Taoism, or celebrating the Chinese New Year, after the horrible mistreatment, enslavement, and discrimination against Chinese immigrants in our nation's history. And what of Christianity, the dominant religion in our culture, which is based upon the appropriation of Jewish religion and scripture, the most sacred teachings of a group that has experienced extreme racism in the U.S., as well as being among the most oppressed people in the world?

The point I'm making here is that the rules around cultural appropriation are unclear and inconsistent, making them confusing, and, additionally, difficult to prevent given the natural tendency for cultures that collide to assimilate, coningle, and blend. I have the same trouble with the concept of microaggressions, a term coined in 1970 by Harvard professor of psychiatry, Chester M. Pierce who originally used it to describe casual comments meant to intentionally degrade marginalized groups that create cumulative damage over time. Today, however, the experts I've read on the subject say the meaning of the term has evolved since then, although no one seems to be in complete agreement about what it has now evolved to mean. Though it seems to now have something to do with unconscious racism, not overt insults, which requires those who accuse others of it to somehow have the power to look into their minds and to know the secret intentions behind their words.

Shortly after the recent national election, for example, like many of you, I began wearing a safety pin as a way of saying "I'm safe," that I'm not someone who could ever vote for a person who is openly racist and misogynistic. To my surprise, I was approached by a young woman, a young white woman, who suggested it was a symbol of my white privilege and an attempt to appease my own guilty conscience for not actively doing anything to help the black community or to prevent Trump from being elected to begin with. Taken aback, I tried to explain that I have personally worked to reform the institutionally racist criminal justice systems in my communities, both here, as an original member of the Smart Justice Executive Committee, and in Louisville, where I chaired a committee that tackled disproportionate minority confinement by developing a Restorative Justice program that has since prevented hundreds from entering the school to prison pipeline. I've also used my voice, a voice that will not be silenced, to call for radical transformation by instituting a reverse quota system in our prisons making it illegal to incarcerate more people of any ethnicity than are represented in the community at large; and for the release, complete pardon, financial reparations, and the restoration of dignity to all people of color who have been locked away and disenfranchised due to the politically motivated drug war. I also mentioned our church's efforts to assist a local Black Church in its move to a new location. Yet none of this seemed to impress the young woman calling me out. All she seemed to see was a white male micro-aggressively wearing a safety pin.

Don't get me wrong, I think these emerging social technologies, PC, appropriation, and microaggressions have an important place in making our world a more just and better place for everyone, but I believe the culture of "calling people out," which as Deresiewicz says, only creates "a space of hostility," and says, "you don't belong; you are different in a way that's not okay,"¹⁰ is chilling. As someone told me this week, this needs to be about "calling people in, not calling them out," which means, to me, we shouldn't shame people by insinuating they are unconscious racists in front of others, but having, instead, a one on one conversation about what we heard and how it sounds. Nor do I mean we ought not rally together when bigots come to speak in our communities and universities, but that our rallies should be about demonstrating our own values and beliefs, not merely opposing those of others.

Tomorrow I will be heading to New Orleans to attend the Unitarian Universalist Association's Annual Meeting, and I leave with a heavy heart. Several months ago, I was invited to serve on its Worship Arts Team to help prepare one of its worship services. I was told I'd been invited because of my skills in the area of worship, and was quite flattered to have the opportunity to help fashion a meaningful service for Unitarian Universalists around the nation. But I found the process stifling and did not end up with a service I feel good about, but a service that, for some, will look and sound politically correct. I wanted, for instance, to use the hymn "One More Step," but was told it's on the "questionable list." When I asked why, I was told it might offend people who can't walk. I then suggested, "We'll Build a Land," but was told it might offend Native Americans. Nor could I include the Native American story of the Heyoka I'm so fond of because it's misappropriation. It was insinuated that I couldn't allow any white men to speak about oppression. And when I was told my service was the whitest of them all, and began responding by pointing out the ethnicities of my worship leaders, I found myself becoming sick to my stomach, for I am not accustomed to speaking of human beings in these terms, as numbers and colors, yet realize, by making sure I had three African Americans and a Latino, that I had let this process cause me to tokenize others based on their race.

Worse than this, if you haven't heard, about three months ago, after a Latina woman was turned down for a position with the UUA that went to a white male, concerns of racist hiring practices within our denomination arose, as they should. I won't go into all the details, but there seem to be two accounts; one claiming that we are institutionally racist, and one claiming the individual wasn't the best candidate for the job. All of this led to our President, Peter Morales suddenly resigning from his post, to many other resignations, and to a Denomination in chaos. In the midst of it all, BLUU (Black Lives Unitarian Universalists) began asking our congregations to hold teach-ins about White Supremacist structures within our own denomination and churches. Some of us, for obvious reasons, have been pained by the use of this extreme term, which seems to lump us into the same category as the KKK, the Alt-Right, and other racist organizations. Others aren't bothered by it and think it's a good way to help us look at our own structures of institutional racism.

I personally am extremely bothered by its use and just don't get it. I certainly do accept that ours is a White Supremacist society. The police shootings of unarmed black men, the Jim

¹⁰ Ibid.

Crow era of racially motivated mass incarceration, disproportionate poverty, unemployment, inadequate healthcare, schools, housing, and so on in our nation's African American Communities is proof enough of this deplorable reality. Even so, White Supremacy, until this moment, has referred to hate groups that want to intentionally erect systems of racist segregation and inequality, not those who are working to disable them, imperfect and unaware of our own blind spots as we might be. As Columbia University professor of English, John McWhorter writes in his recent Time Magazine article on *The Difference between Racial Bias and White Supremacy*, "These days, the term 'white supremacy' is being used not as an argument but as a weapon."¹¹

Even so, despite my opinion and reaction to this term being used in regard to my faith and my church, as a liberal I do not think it should be banned from our discourse. Those who think this term is appropriate should be allowed to express their opinions, just as those who disagree with its use should be allowed to express theirs. In fact, I met and spoke with a fellow just yesterday, who works at EWU and has some expertise in this area, an African American gentleman whom I've asked to come lead a workshop for us in the near future. More to come on that.

I realize this sermon is already longer than usual, but not as long as I wish we had time for. But, in closing, I want us to consider something that happened a few months ago at one of our own City Council meetings about passing an ordinance against a registry based on religion. The room was cram-packed, with most in attendance against such a registry. But, on occasion, someone would speak for it, at which point everyone else began turning their backs to the speaker. As I witnessed this, I paused to think about what my response ought to be, despite my instinct to simply turn away with the crowd. But after a few seconds, I realized those I may disagree with have every right to express their opinions, especially in such a setting. To turn my back would indicate I don't think they have a place in our community. This is precisely the same reason I didn't participate in the protests when Condoleezza Rice came to speak at Whitworth a couple years ago, or when Donald Trump came to campaign here in 2016. It's why, when asked to help organize a protest of Rick Santorum's visit a few weeks before our historic vote on marriage equality, I said, "I can't participate in the protest of another person's presence or right to speak. My faith requires me to uphold the worth and dignity of every person, and to protest someone's presence is to protest their right to live and to be free. If, instead, we create a response that is a demonstration of our own values, I would be pleased to help." That was the beginning of our "People of Faith Support the Freedom to Marry" campaign that helped win over the hearts of voters in our area and make marriage equality a reality in our state.

I realize some may have a different opinion on these difficult issues than me. So what? I'm glad of it, and I will fight for your right to have them, and to express them. What I'm asking today is that whether we agree or not, we all agree to protect free speech for everyone.

¹¹ McWhorter, John, *The Difference Between Racial Bias and White Supremacy*, Time, Nov. 29, 2016.