



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on September 5, 2021

On Free Speech, Elites May be “Looking to Move in for the Kill,” Writer Warns

Among a multitude of evils, here’s something else your tax money is helping fund: an effort to squelch your free-speech rights.

At issue is a National Public Radio *On the Media* [episode](#) about the “dangers” of free speech. The program’s guests included, [writes](#) liberal commentator Matt Taibbi at Substack, “Andrew Marantz, author of an article called, ‘Free Speech is Killing Us’; P.E. Moskowitz, author of ‘The Case Against Free Speech’; Susan Benesch, director of the ‘Dangerous Speech Project’; and Berkeley professor John Powell, whose contribution was to rip John Stuart Mill’s defense of free speech in *On Liberty* as ‘wrong.’” Taibbi then continues:



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That’s about right for NPR, which for years now has regularly congratulated itself for being a beacon of diversity while expunging every conceivable alternative point of view.

... The show was a compendium of every neo-authoritarian argument for speech control one finds on Twitter, beginning with the blanket labeling of censorship critics as “speech absolutists” (most are not) and continuing with shameless revisions of the history of episodes like the ACLU’s mid-seventies defense of Nazi marchers at Skokie, Illinois.

The essence of arguments made by all of NPR’s guests is that the modern conception of speech rights is based upon John Stuart Mill’s outdated conception of harm, which they summarized as saying, “My freedom to swing my fist ends at the tip of your nose.”

Because, they say, we now know that people can be harmed by something other than physical violence, Mill (whose thoughts NPR overlaid with harpsichord music, so we could be reminded how antiquated they are) was wrong, and we have to recalibrate our understanding of speech rights accordingly.

... Mill ironically pointed out that “princes, or others who are accustomed to unlimited deference, usually feel this complete confidence in their own opinions on nearly all subjects.” Sound familiar?

None of this is new, and not just because stifling inconvenient speech has been the power pseudo-elite’s historical norm. In recent times we’ve heard of “microaggressions,” “safe spaces,” and the notion that expressing ideas refutative of leftism constitutes “violence” (along with the corresponding idea, designed to compel approved speech, that “silence is violence”).



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Now, a fair analysis acknowledges that, yes, words are powerful, which is why the sayings “The pen is mightier than the sword” and “Knowledge is power” exist; words also *can do harm*, as evidenced by the vile rhetoric inciting last year’s 600-plus BLM/Antifa riots. But there’s another side to this: Words can as well forestall harm — and advance the good.

Speaking of which, the Professor Powell cited by Taibbi made in *On the Media* an argument he likely fancied quite clever. “The speech absolutists try to say, ‘You can’t regulate speech,’” he stated. “Why? ‘Well, because it would harm the speaker. It would somehow truncate their expression and their self-determination.’”

“And you say, ‘Okay, what’s the harm?’” he continued. “‘Well, the harm is, a psychological harm.’ Wait a minute, I thought you said psychological harms did not count?”

If you don’t remember saying that, you’re not alone. Taibbi points out that Powell’s argument, made in reference to that Nazi march in the predominantly Jewish suburb of Skokie, is misleading. In fact, the ACLU never defended the Nazis on a “psychological harm” basis but a *minority rights one*.

Yet delving deeper, Powell’s argument can be turned around on him: If in fact both allowing and disallowing speech can cause psychological harm, why do you prioritize one group’s protection from it over another group’s?

If Powell would say the onus belongs on the proactive side, the ones issuing “offending words,” then do the Nazis get protected from anti-National Socialist rhetoric? Will all criticism of all people, across the board, be banned because it’s guaranteed to psychologically harm somebody?

If Powell would say those who’d suffer greater psychological harm should be protected, how does he assess something so subjective? Does he possess a psychological harm barometer?

In reality, Powell would probably say the onus belongs on those spewing “hate speech.” But will Nazis, then, be protected from the expression of those who hate Nazism? If he’d say that’s not hate speech, why not? Does hate speech have to be wrong and bad and not just motivated by hate?

The honest answer would be yes, and this means that the issue, at bottom, is not “psychological harm” but a *qualitative* judgment about speech. This, of course, is always the issue. For example, when personally governing our tongues, what should we say and not say? What speech (e.g., vulgarity) should we stifle in young children or in schools?

The reality, though, is that I’ve never heard a “conservative” speech defender use the psychological harm argument (that’s the focus of self-centered, me-oriented leftists). Rather, the point is that a government that can censor all you hate can also censor all you love; or, put less relativistically, a government that can censor all that’s bad can also censor all that’s good.

We’ve seen this before. China’s first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, killed hundreds of scholars; and the USSR’s Lysenkoists would imprison and sometimes even execute biologists who questioned their heritability of acquired traits dogma (i.e., the notion that plucking a plant’s leaves will cause it to have leafless descendants), to cite just two examples. Have you, Professor Powell, finally discovered a race of eminently fair, perfectly objective, divinely dispassionate government angels to censor speech for us?

In reality, all Powell et al.’s reasons are rationalizations at best, ruses at worst. As the top commenter under Taibbi’s article wrote, “The Left supported free speech until they got what they wanted, institutional and cultural power. Now they want to do away with it because it threatens them. They will disguise their desire to do so with claims of ‘It’s to protect you!’ but ultimately, it’s all about them and



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eliminating their opposition.”

For sure. As commentator Monica Showalter [puts it](#), writing about NPR, the ruling pseudo-elites may be “looking to move in for the kill.” They’re continuing an effort I wrote about in 2008 in “[The Race for the American Mind](#)”: They’re trying to shut down Truth dissemination before enough people can be awakened and shut them down. If they can do that, psychological harm will be the least of your problems.



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