

The New Censorship

Is this the return of the Thought Police?

by Phyllis Chesler



In 1984, George Orwell wrote: "The two aims of the Party are to conquer the whole surface of the earth and to extinguish once and for all the possibility of independent thought. When people 'disappear' no one is allowed to mention it, no one is mourned, no one person is important, only the Party and Big Brother are important."

Today, Orwell's Thought Police are, rather ominously, everywhere. There is a definite intellectual chill in the air. Reason and civility are all but gone in the public square. In its place, we have insults, shaming, censorship and self-censorship that is meant to "pass" for thought. Hotly internalized propaganda rules the day online. We have met Big Brother, and he is us.

In my view, people seem to develop some kind of

psychoanalytic transference to their Listserv groups. In a way, the connection is an umbilical one. The darker side of this connection isn't hard to find. Internet Listserv groups bully and purge dissident members—this has [happened to me](#) and to many others. Sometimes, a small group of people (teenage “mean girls” and their mothers, academics, journalists,) attack the same person over and over again, day after day, for months, even for years. Meanwhile, hundreds of onlookers remain silent. No one stops the attacks or calls for a more civilized fight.

Unlike in-person mobs, attackers on social media attack and instantly disappear. Often, people attack one by one, one after the other, in sequence, even when there are hundreds of them. As a result, individuals in cyberspace may continue to see themselves as individuals rather than as members of a lynch mob or as contributing to an atmosphere in which people are systematically demoralized or silenced.

This New Intolerance and the New Censorship that online mobs zealously enforce is narrowly focused, in ways that are hard to miss when you are a member of a targeted group. In my experience, being the object of mob opprobrium has everything to do with where one “stands” on ethnic bigotry towards the Jewish people, on Israel/Palestine, and on Islam. Meanwhile, Sunni-Shia fratricide, African genocides, worldwide sexual slavery, war-zone atrocities, the persecution of dissidents and infidels in the Islamic world go largely unremarked upon. This is by design. The only events that matter are those that might feed pathological obsessions with the Jews.

Once you've taken the “wrong” stand on Israel or Islam, your reputation precedes you. No matter what other subjects you may be talking or writing about,

(gardening, cooking, grandchildren, feminism, the Crimean War), these positions will forever haunt you and block your path. This too is by design; it is a deliberate strategy to inhibit argument and free thought by directing the mob to attack those who dare to step out of line. This is why so few people take such stands. They can clearly see what happens to those who do.

Last week, I was being interviewed by a genuine, not a faux, feminist, who praised my work but then said: "Yes, but now I must ask you to explain your position on Israel." Israel had nothing to do with our conversation, but it was now an important subject of the interview. What I was expected to "explain" was my failure to conform to a party-line norm. Until I did so, nothing I said on any other topic could legitimately be heard or praised.

About a month ago, the editor of a left-wing magazine said that the only reviewers he could find for my new book, [*A Politically Incorrect Feminist*](#), insisted on using my memoir of feminism in New York City in the 1960s and '70s as an opportunity to challenge my position on Israel/Palestine.

"But I don't write about it in this book," I said.

"It doesn't matter. I cannot get anyone to review you without taking this into account."

Once, one of my publishers strongly suggested that I hire a particular "progressive" publicist. She was, at first, excited to see my name in her inbox and said she would check out my website immediately. By the next day, she was suddenly far too busy to talk to me, work with me, or take my money.

I am only one person. I have endured hundreds of similar encounters while trying to write and think through the

ideas to which I have devoted my life. I will continue to speak and write as I must. My point is to illustrate the way in which political censorship works in practice here and now.

Of course, there is more. Like other independent thinkers in what passes for public discourse in America these days, I have endured near-riots when I spoke on campus, where my public appearances often required police protection. This first happened to me in 2003, when I was not lecturing on any of these hotly contested subjects. Nevertheless, I was immediately challenged by a political operative who demanded to know "[where I stood on the issue of the women of Palestine.](#)" A semi-riot ensued and I had to be hustled out of the room for my safety. Now I know that the price for expressing dissenting ideas in public is the likelihood that a group of inflamed political "organizers" will try to threaten my safety and the safety of those who dare to entertain my views.

My esteemed ally and sister Ayaan Hirsi Ali has been disinvited from lecture dates and awards ceremonies many times; her [dishonorable disinvitations](#) have sometimes been spearheaded by feminists. I have also been [dishonorably disinvited](#), more than [once](#). The point of these de-platforming rituals, of course, is to demonstrate the difference between a Thought Crime and the Party Line. Over and over again, universities and institutions that are supposedly devoted to the free exchange of ideas fail this basic test, strengthening the extremists and the censors by handing them the victories they seek.

Even in America, books have been censored, canceled, or never accepted because the subject matter is seen as "Islamophobic" or "Zionist" or "blasphemous." Understandably, publishers do not want their offices

firebombed or their staff kidnapped, nor do they want to absorb the cost of increased security. Instead, they censor authors by refusing to publish work on matters of obvious social and communal importance. For years, Israeli consulates and embassies as well as Jewish synagogues and Jewish centers have been subject to threats and bombings, and have had to install ever-more-elaborate security measures to protect themselves against violence. Airports everywhere on earth have followed suit.

The threats that necessitate these measures are not posed by wild-eyed, book-burning neo-Nazis on the far right. They are a response to decades of Arab Palestinian bombings, hijackings and shootings, the hijacking of airplanes by al-Qaida, and state-sponsored terror campaigns run directly by high officials of the Iranian regime, which frequently threatens to commit genocide against Israel and its citizens—allegedly a high crime, according to the U.N. Is my saying so “Islamophobic?” The recent Big Brother tactics of [Google, Facebook, and Twitter](#) suggest that it is.

Europe is ground zero for the New Censorship. Recently, my esteemed colleague, the author Bruce Bawer, was asked to deliver a speech in Gothenburg, Sweden. He planned to talk about Freedom of Speech at the “Alternative” Book Fair, as those who wrote about Islam were not invited to the regular Book Fair. However, he was disinvited from the Alternative Fair due to threats of antifa violence. Then, the entire “Alternative” Book Fair was canceled.

Bawer [published the speech](#) he would have given, a mournful piece about how the “walls are closing in on free speech.” It was a eulogy, in the vein of what both British Foreign Secretary Sir Edward Grey said on the eve of Britain’s entry into World War I and what Sir Winston Churchill said in 1938, namely, that “the

lamps/lights are going out all over Europe,” and that the “stations of uncensored expression are closing down.”

There, many truth-tellers have been sued ([Geert Wilders](#)), held in contempt of court and forced into exile ([Oriana Fallaci](#)), fined ([Elisabeth Sabaditsch-Wolff](#)), forced into hiding and/or shot at ([Salman Rushdie](#), [Lars Vilks](#), [Lars Hedegaard](#))—and/or have required 24/7 police protection ([Seyran Ates](#), [Magdi Allam](#)). At one point, according to Magdi Allam’s wife, Valentina Colombo, with whom I met, Allam, who publicly converted from Islam to Catholicism, required six bodyguards.

On Oct. 25, 2018, the European Convention on Human Rights [ruled](#) that Sabaditsch-Wolff was [not allowed to say](#) that the prophet Muhammad was a pedophile, even if he married Aisha when she was 6 and consummated the marriage when she was 9 years old and he was 53. Saying so, violated the “peace” in Europe.

What all these European dissidents have in common is that they’ve dared to express their (positive) views about Israel, and their (less than positive) views about Islam, Islamism, Muslim immigration, Islamic gender and religious apartheid and jihad. Although Islam is not a race, such ideas are considered racist even if they are true, perhaps especially if they are true.

Many European countries still have “antiquated blasphemy laws” on the books which date back to the times when [“insults to the church were not tolerated.”](#) In addition, European countries are genuinely struggling to define “hate speech” (against Jews, Africans, and Muslim immigrants). Conservatives/civil libertarians believe that their truth speech is being censored and defamed—but so do those who are scorned as leftists.

In my view, European leaders and citizens are behaving like people who are terrified of provoking the barbarian supremacists in their midst. They also feel that they have much to atone for in terms of their past colonial adventures, and their past racist genocides, both in Europe and globally. Censoring the truth, lest it provoke violence, lest it reveal Europeans as the genocidal racists they or their ancestors have been, is what is also behind the New Censorship in Europe.

But deflecting anger about Europe's past crimes isn't justice and it harms the cause of human freedom everywhere. It's a cheap dodge, for which Europe is paying a rising price. Let's not make the same mistakes here.

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