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The Friction Between Political Correctness and Freedom of Speech in Contemporary Democratic Societies

Assessing the Need for a Recalibrated Equilibrium within the International Legal
Framework

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Abstract

This dissertation examines the relationship between political correctness and freedom of speech, questioning whether the contemporary dynamics of political correctness and free expression occur within the international legal framework or whether there is the need for a furthered balance. The study does so by following a multidisciplinary methodology, amalgamating legal, philosophical, psychological and social scientific sources. Firstly, it traces the historical and cultural evolution of political correctness, subsequently analysing the statutory structure of freedom of speech through the principal international human rights instruments. It then explores the current objectives pursued by political correctness, before examining the leading arguments advanced both in support of and against the phenomenon. Particular attention is devoted to the interaction between political correctness and freedom of expression, assessing, from an empirical viewpoint, whether the two values are ultimately compatible or fundamentally antithetical. The final chapter turns to the most contested practical arenas in which this tension manifests: hate speech regulation, “cancel culture”, and the effects of political correctness on artistic and creative outputs, culminating in the case study of Kanye West. The thesis concludes that, although the normative foundations of political correctness find genuine grounding in the established transnational apparatus, its extrajudicial mechanisms of informal sanction frequently exceed such lawful limits and disproportionately restrict expressive liberty, thereby suggesting the need for a more calibrated approach.

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Chapter 1 Political Correctness and Free Expression: Historical Evolution and International Legal Foundations

1. Political Correctness: its Origins and Development

The notion of political correctness (PC) has recently reached the peak of its fame, becoming ubiquitous and cutting across all spheres of life, from the corporate world to everyday interactions. Nowadays, the expression occupies a prominent place in contemporary society and evokes diverse images in peoples' minds. Nevertheless, the term was not coined in the last decades and actually has much deeper roots than one could think. The first occasion in which political correctness has been used in an official context dates back to 1793, when a decision from the United States Supreme Court was pronounced. In that case, the judge referred to not being political correct as being in contrast with the premises of the American Constitution¹. Lately, some scholars have traced the development of political correctness back to Marxism² and the Frankfurt School³, which are intellectual traditions that spread throughout Europe respectively in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The German current collected the legacy left by Karl Marx and focused on the role of culture and language; instead of concentrating on the economic aspect of the theory, the academics from Frankfurt decided to emphasise how certain forms of speech can foster discrimination and inequality. In particular, the work of Herbert Marcuse resulted essential for such a methodology change as his essay, titled "Repressive Tolerance", challenged the assumption according to which all forms of speech should be protected equally⁴. In the author's view, granting protection to every display of ideas can reinforce injustices, when the opinions shared involve harmful or extreme thoughts. A similar interpretation of the communist ideology is the reason why various commentators believe that the concept of political correctness, as known today, originated from the contribution made by the above-mentioned school. However, after analysing several sources on the matter, it seems appropriate to conclude that pinpointing a direct connection between the critique of a comprehensive tolerance and political correctness may be an excessively optimistic approach. A nexus is undoubtedly present and PC extended its influence globally in a manner that aligns with

¹ See A. Scalcău, "A Historical Perspective on Political Correctness", in *Management Research and Practice*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 2020, pp. 29–30.

² See V. Stoica, "Intellectual Origins and the Evolution of Political Corectness – A Critical Perspective", in *Revista de Științe Politice*, No. 69, 2021, pp. 84–92.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ See R. P. Wolff, B. Moore, H. Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, Beacon Press, 1965, pp. 81–90.

Marcuse's thesis; yet, the movement emerged and developed as a phenomenon aiming to promote inclusion while reducing discrimination in more recent times. On a similar and less tangible note, the correlation with Marxism appears somewhat opaque and indirect; as previously stated, the communist doctrine was centered on class struggle and economic issues, the shift of focus initiated by the Frankfurt School was essential in addressing concerns regarding language misuses and norms of public discourse. Consequently, although Karl Marx's teachings can be portrayed as a starting point, they did not contribute directly to the rise of political correctness.

Having established the origins of the concept, it is now time to explain what it embodies in modern communities. Political correctness can be depicted as the process of expressing opinions or thoughts without offending anyone. Avoiding verbal discrimination, in both spoken and written contexts, is its primary aim; special attention is directed towards safeguarding the interests of minorities, which can be categorised on the basis of gender, ethnicity, social conditions, religious beliefs, political ideas, personal convictions or sexual orientation, among others⁵. The current comprehension of political correctness is the result of developments that took place in the United States of America starting from the 1980s. In that decade, universities played the role of central arenas for debates on equality, representation, and inclusion of historically marginalised groups, thanks to the influence of civil rights, feminism, and anti-racism movements⁶. It was during this period that an increasing focus was devoted to the role of communication in shaping social realities, leading to the promotion of speech codes to enhance impartiality and avoid discrimination. The discourse surrounding political correctness gradually extended beyond the US borders since the 1990s, when debates originating in American academic contexts began to influence European public discourse through processes of globalisation and cultural exchange⁷. The European framework in welcoming the intellectual current was based on a legal dimension that admitted restrictions to free speech, under the European Convention of Human Rights⁸. On the opposite, the American approach was strongly correlated with the higher education debate and the right of

⁵ See S. Vlachopoulos, *Political Correctness as Modern Censorship? From Legal to Political Correctness and to the Boundaries of Intellectual Expression*, Springer Nature, 2026, p. 7.

⁶ See B. R. Ford, "Political Correctness", in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Communication*, 2017.

⁷ See M. Ullén, "The feminist origins of 'political correctness': PC terms in JSTOR", in *Feminist Theory*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 2024, pp. 142–165.

⁸ See Section 2.2 for a detailed discussion on the implementation of freedom of speech within the European Convention of Human Rights.

freedom of expression as described in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution⁹. Discussions over political correctness in Europe mainly took into account the relations among power, language, and social cohesion, associating it with multiculturalism and identity politics. As a result, the movement became a global phenomenon that involved local judicial systems, cultural traditions, and diversity¹⁰.

The reason for the present tension surrounding political correctness lies in its relationship with the right to freedom of speech, particularly in the difficulty of achieving a balanced accommodation between the two. This tension proceeds to generate significant debate, as sharply divergent positions persist. On the one hand, proponents of political correctness argue that the adoption of a respectful and inclusive vocabulary can challenge entrenched patterns of exclusionary and stigmatising language. On the other hand, its detractors warn against the risks associated with what they perceive as an excessive regulation of freedom of expression, suggesting that such tendencies may hinder open debate and restrict the vigorous exchange of ideas. These competing perspectives will be examined in detail in a later section¹¹. At this stage, however, it is essential to highlight the broader conundrum underlying the debate: the daunting task of reconciling the protection of individual dignity and social equity with the preservation of a fundamental human right such as free speech. The question of whether, and to what extent, it is possible to safeguard both values without disproportionately limiting one or the other remains at the core of contemporary discussions on political correctness.

2. Freedom of Speech and Expression: Legal Foundations

The right to free speech has been progressively elaborated and codified within a complex network of international and regional legal instruments. These frameworks collectively define both the scope of the right and the conditions under which it may be legitimately restricted, thereby shaping its contemporary understanding. At the universal level, freedom of expression is first and most prominently enunciated in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR).

⁹ The First Amendment of the US Constitution reads as follows: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances”.

¹⁰ See N. Fairclough, “Political Correctness: The Politics of Culture and Language”, in *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2003, pp. 17–28; O. Pérez de la Fuente, “On Political Correctness”, in *Social Sciences*, Vol. 8, No. 10, 2019, pp. 277–286; S. Dzenis, F. N. Faria, “Political Correctness: the Twofold Protection of Liberalism”, in *Philosophia*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2020, pp. 95–111.

¹¹ For an in-deep examination about arguments both in favour and against political correctness see Chapter 2, Sections 1–2.

Despite the fact that the UDHR is not a legally binding instrument, it has played a foundational role in defining the modern human rights architecture and has influenced subsequent binding treaties at international and regional planes¹². Building upon the principles established by the UDHR, a significant convention is the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which provides a legally binding formulation of the above-mentioned freedom in Article 19. Turning to the regional sphere, the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) offers one of the most developed systems of protection for free speech. Article 10 of the document secures the right while explicitly allowing for restrictions that are necessary in a democratic society. Freedom of expression is also firmly guaranteed in the Inter-American context, namely under Article 13 of the American Convention on Human Rights (ACHR). The interpretation of this right by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has consistently emphasised its essential role in a pluralistic order, often adopting a particularly robust approach to its safeguarding¹³. In addition to these general instruments, more specialised treaties address aspects of freedom of expression in relation to specific forms of harm. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD), for instance, requires States to prohibit certain forms of racist expression, including the dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred¹⁴. As a result, ICERD reflects a more interventionist approach, prioritising the protection of equality and dignity over an unrestricted conception of expressive freedom, in contrast with the broader formulations found in the UDHR, ICCPR, and ECHR. Taken together, these documents illustrate the evolving and inherently balanced nature of free speech as a legal right. While its paramount importance remains undisputed, there is a clear trend towards acknowledging the need to reconcile this freedom with other rights and interests. As noted in academic literature, such a balancing exercise is central to modern democratic systems, where freedom of expression must coexist with competing values, encompassing equality, dignity, and public order¹⁵. The emergence of detailed limitation clauses and the increasing role of judicial interpretation demonstrate that freedom of speech is not an absolute right, but one that must be carefully calibrated within a broader human rights framework. At the same time, the emphasis on

¹² For an extremely accurate examination on such influence, see J. Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, Drafting and Intent*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999; M. A. Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Random House, 2001.

¹³ See Inter-American Court of Human Rights, *Compulsory Membership in an Association Prescribed by Law for the Practice of Journalism*, Advisory Opinion OC-5/85, 13 November 1985, Series A No. 5.

¹⁴ See *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*, (adopted 21 December 1965, entered into force 4 January 1969), 660 UNTS 195, art. 4(a), (hereinafter ICERD).

¹⁵ D. Voorhoof, H. Cannie, “Freedom of Expression and Information in a Democratic Society”, in *International Communication Gazette*, Vol. 72, No. 4–5, 2010, p. 408; J. Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 145–147, 171–172.

necessity and proportionality highlights the risks associated with excessive limitations. Accordingly, the international legal framework not only defines the boundaries of freedom of expression, but likewise provides the conceptual and normative tools necessary to assess the legitimacy of competing claims, particularly in contemporary debates surrounding the relationship between free speech and political correctness.

2.1 Universal Declaration of Human Rights

The global recognition of freedom of expression as a crucial human right finds its earliest and singularly influential formulation in Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Adopted in the aftermath of the Second World War, the UDHR sought to establish a common standard¹⁶ aimed at safeguarding individual liberty and averting the re-emergence of authoritarian regimes¹⁷. Within such an infrastructure, free speech was conceived as an essential condition for both personal autonomy and democratic governance. Article 19 affirms that “everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers”¹⁸. This provision is notable for its breadth, including not only the act of expression itself but also the preceding processes of information gathering and dissemination¹⁹.

Although the UDHR is not a legally binding instrument, its normative significance cannot be overstated. The document has contributed to the development of customary international law; moreover, it remains the bedrock of successive treaties, as previously mentioned²⁰. In particular, its articulation of freedom of speech has influenced both universal and regional human rights systems, providing a reference point for courts, legislators, and scholars. The absence of an explicit limitation clause within Article 19 distinguishes it from more recent instruments and reflects the aspirational character of the Declaration. Nevertheless, this does not imply that freedom of expression is absolute; Article 29 of the UDHR clarifies that rights may be subject to limitations

¹⁶ As stated in UN General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Res. 217 A (III), 10 December 1948, Preamble, (hereinafter UDHR).

¹⁷ See J. Morsink, *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Origins, Drafting and Intent*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999, pp. 1–6.

¹⁸ See UDHR, Art. 19.

¹⁹ See M. A. Glendon, *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Random House, 2001, pp. xv–xvi.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

necessary to ensure respect for the rights of others and for preserving the requirements of morality, public order and general welfare²¹. Therefore, the conceptualisation of freedom of expression in the UDHR reflects a dual dimension. On the one hand, it establishes a broad and global entitlement that safeguards the free exchange of ideas across borders, thereby promoting pluralism and intercultural dialogue. On the other hand, it implicitly acknowledges that such freedom operates in a social context where competing interests must be taken into account. This tension between expansive protection and the need for restrictions has become a defining feature of subsequent legal developments in the field of human rights and cannot be neglected in light of the present enquiry. Furthermore, the inclusion of this freedom in the UDHR underscores its intrinsic connection to other essential principles, such as freedom of thought, conscience, and participation in public life. It is widely recognised that the effective exercise of these rights depends on the ability to communicate opinions without external constraints and to access diverse sources of information. For this reason, freedom of speech is often described simultaneously as an individual right and a constitutional pillar of democratic societies²². Its early codification in the Declaration laid the groundwork for a more detailed and legally enforceable apparatus, which would later be formalised through instruments characterised by a prescriptive nature.

2.2 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

The entrenchment of freedom of expression was significantly strengthened through the adoption of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which further consolidated many of the principles enshrined in the UDHR as legally binding obligations. Adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1966 and entered into force in 1976, the ICCPR is widely regarded as one of the foundational treaties of contemporary international human rights law. While the UDHR established freedom of expression as a universal ideal, the Covenant introduced a concrete legal regime capable of imposing obligations upon States parties and enabling international monitoring through the Human Rights Committee²³. Article 19 of the ICCPR is structured in three distinct paragraphs, each addressing a specific dimension of the right. The first one guarantees the freedom

²¹ See UDHR, art. 29.

²² D. Voorhoof, H. Cannie, “Freedom of Expression and Information in a Democratic Society”, in *International Communication Gazette*, Vol. 72, No. 4–5, 2010, p. 407–410.

²³ See S. Joseph, M. Castan, *The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: Cases, Materials, and Commentary*, 3rd edn, Oxford University Press, 2013, pp. 673–675.

“to hold opinions without interference”²⁴, a protection generally considered absolute due to the impossibility of legitimately restricting internal thought or belief²⁵. The following section broadens the scope of protection by recognising the “freedom to seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers” and through any media²⁶. This formulation substantially reproduces the language of Article 19 of the UDHR and demonstrates the intention of the drafters to preserve the broad and global conception of free speech articulated in 1948²⁷. The provision safeguards not only political discourse, but also artistic and academic expression, journalism, and forms of communication that may challenge prevailing social or political norms. Unlike the UDHR, however, the ICCPR explicitly establishes a legal mechanism which allows for limitations on the right. Indeed, the third paragraph stipulates that restrictions may only be imposed where they are prescribed by law and necessary for the respect of the rights or reputations of others, or for the protection of national security, public order, public health, or morals²⁸. Consequently, the ICCPR adopts a balancing approach, recognising both the fundamental importance of freedom of expression and the possibility that its exercise may interfere with competing entitlements and collective interests²⁹. This two-fold nature has become one of the defining features of modern human rights law and reflects the inherent tension within freedom of speech as both an individual liberty and a socially embedded prerogative³⁰.

Authoritative guidance on the interpretation of Article 19 of the Covenant is provided by the United Nations Human Rights Committee in its General Comment No. 34, published in 2011, which emphasises that freedom of expression is an essential condition for the full development of the individual and “constitutes a foundation stone for every free and democratic society”³¹. Importantly, the Committee underscores that the right extends not only to information and ideas that

²⁴ See *International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*, (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 23 March 1976), 999 UNTS 171, art. 19, para. 1, (hereinafter ICCPR).

²⁵ See UN Human Rights Committee, “General Comment No. 34: Article 19: Freedoms of opinion and expression”, (12 September 2011), UN Doc. CCPR/C/GC/34, para. 9.

²⁶ See ICCPR, art. 19, para. 2.

²⁷ M. Nowak, *U.N. Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: CCPR Commentary*, 2nd edn, N.P. Engel, 2005, pp. 438–440.

²⁸ See ICCPR, art. 19, para. 3.

²⁹ As already mentioned in Sections 2.1–2.2.

³⁰ D. Voorhoof, H. Cannie, “Freedom of Expression and Information in a Democratic Society”, in *International Communication Gazette*, Vol. 72, No. 4–5, 2010, p. 408–412.

³¹ See UN Human Rights Committee, “General Comment No. 34: Article 19: Freedoms of opinion and expression”, (12 September 2011), UN Doc. CCPR/C/GC/34, para. 2.

are favourably received, but also to those that may be regarded as deeply offensive or disturbing, thereby echoing broader international jurisprudence on pluralism and democratic tolerance³². At the same time, General Comment No. 34 insists that restrictions under Article 19 para. 3 must satisfy strict tests of legality, necessity, and proportionality, ensuring that States cannot invoke vague or excessively broad justifications to suppress dissenting speech³³. This interpretative framework highlights the delicate balance that must be maintained amid the protection of expression and the safeguarding of other conflicting interests. Such an equilibrium is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary debates surrounding political correctness, where tensions frequently emerge between the defense of dignity and equality on the one hand, and the maintenance of open and unrestricted public discourse on the other. By preserving the global aspirations of the UDHR while simultaneously introducing binding obligations and a detailed limitations structure, the Covenant reflects the broader evolution towards a model based on balancing contrasting values. Nevertheless, as noted in academic literature, the increasing stress on equality, dignity, and the protection of vulnerable groups has led to renewed debates concerning the appropriate limits of expression, especially in cases involving hate speech or discriminatory language³⁴. The ICCPR, through Article 19 and its interpretative practice, provides an essential normative apparatus for analysing these tensions and assessing the legitimacy of restrictions imposed upon free speech. Consequently, the legal construction of freedom of expression at the international level offers a crucial foundation for examining the comprehensive question of how political correctness interacts with, and potentially challenges, the boundaries of such a fundamental right.

2.3 European Convention on Human Rights

Freedom of speech on the European level is primarily anchored in Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, adopted in 1950 under the auspices of the Council of Europe. The first section of Article 10 guarantees that “everyone has the right to freedom of expression”, including the “freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without

³² See *Handyside v. United Kingdom*, (App. no. 5493/72), ECtHR 7 December 1976, para. 49.

³³ See UN Human Rights Committee, “General Comment No. 34: Article 19: Freedoms of opinion and expression”, (12 September 2011), UN Doc. CCPR/C/GC/34, paras. 21–36.

³⁴ For an accurate analysis see D. Voorhoof, H. Cannie, “Freedom of Expression and Information in a Democratic Society”, in *International Communication Gazette*, Vol. 72, No. 4–5, 2010, pp. 407–423.

interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers”³⁵. The formulation is strongly influenced by the principles previously articulated in the UDHR and later codified in the ICCPR, thereby confirming the continuity between universal and regional systems of human rights protection. However, the ECHR distinguishes itself through the establishment of a permanent judicial mechanism—the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR)—entrusted with interpreting and enforcing the Convention, which has progressively transformed Article 10 into one of the most extensively litigated and sophisticated clauses within the European mechanism³⁶. The provision is structured into two distinct parts which reflect the regional approach to balancing expressive freedom with competing societal interests. While paragraph 1 defines the scope of the right, paragraph 2 recognises that its exercise carries “duties and responsibilities” and explicitly states that this enjoyment may be subject to restrictions prescribed by law and necessary in a democratic society³⁷. The concept of necessity implies the existence of a pressing social need and through doctrines such as the margin of appreciation, the Court grants States a degree of discretion in determining whether limitations are necessary, particularly in morally or culturally sensitive matters³⁸. Nevertheless, this discretion is not unlimited, as is subjected to European supervision, indeed the ECtHR remains responsible for reviewing if interferences satisfy the requirements of legality, proportionality and necessity³⁹. This doctrine has become especially significant in cases involving hate speech, religious offence, discriminatory expression, and extremist discourse, where the Court has attempted to preserve a fair equilibrium between expressive freedom and other protected interests, including dignity, equality, and public order⁴⁰. The Convention identifies several legitimate aspects capable of justifying restrictions, such as national security, territorial integrity,

³⁵ See *Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms*, (adopted 4 November 1950, entered into force 3 September 1953), ETS 5, art. 10, para. 1, (hereinafter ECHR).

³⁶ See D. Harris, M. O’Boyle, C. Warbrick, *Law of the European Convention on Human Rights*, 4th edn., Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 651–653; B. Rainey, E. Wicks, C. Ovey, *The European Convention on Human Rights*, 7th edn., Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 469–472.

³⁷ See ECHR, art. 10, para. 2; as noted by P. Leach, *Taking a Case to the European Court of Human Rights*, 4th edn., Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 456–458, any interference by a State must pass a triple test: it must be prescribed by law, pursue one or more legitimate aims, (such as national security, public order, or the protection of the reputation of others), and be necessary in a democratic society.

³⁸ According to A. Lester, D. Pannick, J. Herberg, *Human Rights Law and Practice*, 3rd edn., LexisNexis, 2009, pp. 482–485, the high level of protection afforded to political speech leaves very little room for restrictions under art. 10 para. 2, as the free exchange of political ideas is the lifeblood of a functioning democracy.

³⁹ See C. Grabenwarter, *European Convention on Human Rights: Commentary*, C.H. Beck, 2014, pp. 265–267; D. Harris, M. O’Boyle, C. Warbrick, *Law of the European Convention on Human Rights*, 4th edn., Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 665–668.

⁴⁰ See B. Rainey, E. Wicks, C. Ovey, *The European Convention on Human Rights*, 7th edn., Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 483–486.

prevention of disorder or crime, protection of health or morals, and protection of the reputation or rights of others⁴¹. Consequently, freedom of speech under the treaty is not conceived as absolute, but rather as a right whose exercise must be reconciled with other democratic values and interests⁴². According to European scholarship, this balancing mechanism lies at the heart of the Convention system and reflects a broader constitutional commitment to pluralism, social coexistence and judicial adjudication⁴³.

The jurisprudence of the ECtHR has played a decisive role in defining both the scope of protection and the limits of permissible interference under Article 10. One of the most influential decisions in this regard is *Handyside v. United Kingdom*, in which the Court affirmed that freedom of expression applies not only to information or ideas that are favourably received, but also to those that “offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population”⁴⁴. The ECtHR considered such a protection indispensable to pluralism, tolerance, and broadmindedness; this principle has emerged as one of the cornerstones of European free speech jurisprudence and is frequently invoked in cases involving controversial, offensive, or politically sensitive expression⁴⁵. Conversely, the Court adopts a more nuanced approach towards commercial speech or artistic manifestation, where the margin of appreciation granted to States is typically wider, particularly in matters concerning public morals or religion, as seen in *Otto-Preminger-Institut v. Austria*⁴⁶. However, the contemporary challenge of hate speech⁴⁷ has introduced a complex layer to this jurisprudence. Under Article 17 of the Convention, the Court may altogether deny protection to speech that aims at the destruction of the rights and freedoms of others, such as Holocaust denial or incitement to violence⁴⁸. By combining a broad recognition of expressive freedom with detailed limitation criteria and an active supranational court, the ECHR has contributed substantially to shaping the modern understanding of free speech in Europe and thus represents one of the most

⁴¹ See ECHR, art. 10, para. 2.

⁴² The same view is shared by the UDHR and the ICCPR, as described in Sections 2.1–2.2.

⁴³ See D. Harris, M. O’Boyle, C. Warbrick, *Law of the European Convention on Human Rights*, 4th edn., Oxford University Press, 2018, pp. 653–655; A. Mowbray, *Cases and Materials on the European Convention on Human Rights*, 3rd edn., Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 732–734.

⁴⁴ *Handyside v. United Kingdom*, (App. no. 5493/72), ECtHR 7 December 1976, para. 49.

⁴⁵ See D. Voorhoof, H. Cannie, “Freedom of Expression and Information in a Democratic Society”, in *International Communication Gazette*, Vol. 72, No. 4–5, 2010, pp. 409–410.

⁴⁶ See *Otto-Preminger-Institut v. Austria*, (App. no. 13470/87), ECtHR 20 September 1994, paras. 47–50.

⁴⁷ This topic will be adequately scrutinised in Chapter 3, Section 1.

⁴⁸ See ECHR, art. 17; J-F. Flauss, “The European Court of Human Rights and the Freedom of Expression”, in *Indiana Law Journal*, Vol. 84, No. 3, 2009, pp. 812–815.

sophisticated legal systems for the protection of freedom of expression. This vigorous interaction connecting liberty and restriction is especially relevant to contemporary controversies surrounding political correctness, where determining the legal boundaries of expression remains a highly contested issue. Ultimately, the ECHR framework ensures that freedom of speech remains a dynamic and living instrument, capable of adapting to new societal challenges—including the rise of political correctness and digital censorship—while maintaining the core requirement that any limitation remains proportionate to the legitimate aim pursued.

2.4 International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination

The relationship between freedom of expression and the protection of equality assumes a significant dimension within the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1965. The ICERD represents a pivotal yet controversial intersection of the global commitment to racial equity with the defence of free speech. It was drafted in response to growing international concern regarding ethnic discrimination, segregation, and racist ideologies, in the aftermath of colonialism, apartheid, and the persistence of racial violence in several parts of the world⁴⁹. Unlike the wide frameworks established by the previously analysed documents—which mainly focus on protecting the individual’s right to speak—the Convention is characterised by a more prescriptive and restrictive mandate. As a result, the ICERD reflects a distinctive understanding of the relationship between speech and harm, recognising that certain forms of expression may undermine the dignity, equality, and security of targeted groups. This is primarily codified in Article 4(a), which requires States Parties to condemn and criminalize the dissemination of ideas based on racial superiority or hatred, incitement to racial intolerance, and acts of violence or provocation against any race or collectives of another color or ethnic origin⁵⁰, while Article 4(b) demands the prohibition of organisations that promote racial discrimination⁵¹. Therefore, the Convention adopts a more restrictive approach towards certain categories of speech than many traditional liberal conceptions of freedom of expression. According to scholars, Article 4 represents one of the clearest manifestations of the principle that the right may legitimately be limited to safeguard equality and protect vulnerable

⁴⁹ See N. Lerner, *The U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination: A commentary*, 2nd edn., Sijthoff & Noordhoff, 1980, pp. 23–27.

⁵⁰ See ICERD, art. 4(a).

⁵¹ See ICERD, art. 4(b).

communities from intolerance and social exclusion⁵². The interpretation of the provision has generated a substantial ideological debate concerning the balance between addressing racism and preserving free speech. On the one hand, some commentators have contended that the article could pose excessive limitations on public discourse, thereby having a potential “chilling effect” on democratic dialogue which may conflict with broader protections of expression recognised under instruments such as the ICCPR⁵³. Many Western States argued that a mandatory criminalisation of hate speech could be weaponised to suppress legitimate political dissent⁵⁴. Consequently, a “due regard” clause was inserted into the article, stating that the prohibition of racist speech must be implemented with due regard to the principles embodied in the UDHR and the rights expressly set forth in Article 5 of the ICERD, including the right to freedom of opinion and expression⁵⁵. According to legal scholarship, this “due regard” clause acts as a balancing mechanism, although its construction remains a point of contention between the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD) and various States Parties⁵⁶. On the other hand, different academics maintain that racist hate speech directly threatens the dignity and egalitarian status of individuals and therefore falls outside the core values traditionally associated with democratic expression. Jeremy Waldron, for instance, holds that hate speech restrictions are justified because they protect the assurance that members of vulnerable groups are entitled to enjoy as equal citizens of a shared society⁵⁷. From this perspective, limitations imposed under ICERD do not merely restrict expression, but rather seek to preserve the social conditions necessary for the equitable enjoyment of rights. The CERD has reinforced this interpretation through its “General Recommendation No. 35: Combating Racist Hate Speech”. The Committee clarified that the prohibition of racist expressions adopted pursuant to Article 4 is not only compatible with the freedom but also with broader values, including legality, necessity, and proportionality, stressing how racist hate speech

⁵² See K. J. Partsch, “Racial Speech and Human Rights: Article 4 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination”, in S. Coliver, K. Boyle, F. D’Souza (Eds.), *Striking a Balance: Hate Speech, Freedom of Expression and Non-discrimination*, ARTICLE 19, 1992, pp. 21–28.

⁵³ See M. Nowak, *U.N. Covenant on Civil and Political Rights: CCPR Commentary*, 2nd edn, N.P. Engel, 2005, pp. 458–460.

⁵⁴ See P. Thornberry, *The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination: A Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 222–225, where the author scrutinises the debates between the Western bloc and the Afro-Asian one.

⁵⁵ D. Mahalic, J. G. Mahalic, “The Limitation Provisions of the ICERD”, in *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 1987, p. 84; ICERD, art. 5.

⁵⁶ M. Banton, *International Action Against Racial Discrimination*, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 11.

⁵⁷ J. Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 85–89, 105–116.

poses serious threats to social cohesion and public life⁵⁸. This interpretative approach demonstrates that ICERD does not reject free expression, but instead prioritises the protection of dignity and equality where speech contributes to discrimination, hostility, or violence.

Furthermore, the jurisprudence of the CERD, particularly in communications such as *T.K. v. France*⁵⁹ or *The Jewish Community of Oslo v. Norway*⁶⁰, demonstrates a rigorous application of the proportionality principle. The Committee examines whether the interference with speech is provided by law, serves a legitimate aim—the elimination of racial discrimination—and is necessary in a democratic community⁶¹. As noted by Boyle, the ICERD regime suggests that the harm caused by racial vilification is not merely individual but social, undermining the very fabric of a pluralistic society⁶². Thus, the ICERD framework views the restriction of hate speech not as an exception to liberty, but as a foundational requirement for the vibrant interaction among diverse groups within an inclusive constitutional order. The Convention hence occupies a distinctive position within international human rights law. The ICERD places particular emphasis on the harmful social consequences of racist discourse and on the positive obligations of States to intervene against discriminatory expression, rather than focusing primarily on the protection of free speech, as seen in more general documents. This interventionist approach remains highly relevant in contemporary discussions concerning political correctness, hate speech, and the limits of acceptable public dialogue, where the tension between expressive liberty and the protection of marginalised collectives continues to generate profound legal and political disagreement.

2.5 American Convention on Human Rights

The American Convention on Human Rights, adopted in 1969 under the Organisation of American States (OAS), established a remarkably robust and protective framework for freedom of expression within the Inter-American system. Codified under Article 13 of the ACHR, this right is characterised by its broad scope and an explicit prohibition against prior censorship. The first

⁵⁸ See UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, “General Recommendation No. 35: Combating Racist Hate Speech”, (26 September 2013), UN Doc. CERD/C/GC/35, paras. 6–14.

⁵⁹ *T.K. v. France*, (Communication No. 4/1987), CERD 10 August 1990.

⁶⁰ *The Jewish Community of Oslo v. Norway*, (Communication No. 30/2003), CERD 15 August 2005.

⁶¹ See T. McGonagle, “General Recommendation 35 on Combating Racist Hate Speech”, in D. Keane, A. Waughray (Eds.), *Fifty Years of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*, Manchester University Press, 2017, pp. 246–268.

⁶² K. Boyle, “Hate Speech—The United States versus the Rest of the World?”, in *Maine Law Review*, Vol. 53, No. 2, 2001, p. 487–502.

section of the provision empowers individuals to “seek, receive, and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers”, and through any medium⁶³. In opposition to its European counterpart (ECHR)⁶⁴ and other international documents⁶⁵, which allow a wide range of restrictions, Article 13 para. 2 asserts that the exercise of freedom of expression “shall not be subject to prior censorship but shall be subject to subsequent imposition of liability”, in specific and narrowly defined circumstances⁶⁶. This structural choice reflects the historical context in which the Convention was drafted, notably the prevalence of authoritarian regimes and state censorship in parts of Latin America during the second half of the twentieth century⁶⁷. A distinctive feature of the article is its asymmetrical treatment of restrictions compared to other universal and regional instruments. While it permits *ex post* liability for expression that affects the rights or reputations of others, national security, public order, or public health or morals⁶⁸, it simultaneously imposes strict prohibitions on indirect censorship mechanisms, explicitly proscribing “the abuse of government or private controls over newsprint, radio broadcasting frequencies, or equipment used in the dissemination of information, or by any other means tending to impede the communication and circulation of ideas and opinions”⁶⁹. Such a structural safeguard recognizes that censorship often manifests through subtle, economic, or administrative pressures rather than direct state intervention⁷⁰. In this sense, the ACHR establishes one of the most speech-protective legal frameworks in international law, chiefly in comparison with Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which manifestly allows broader categories of interference⁷¹.

The Inter-American Court of Human Rights (IACtHR) has played a crucial role in interpreting and strengthening the scope of Article 13. In its landmark Advisory Opinion OC-5/85, the Court held that free speech constitutes a “cornerstone upon which the very existence of a

⁶³ See *American Convention on Human Rights*, (adopted 22 November 1969, entered into force 18 July 1978), 1144 UNTS 123, art. 13, para. 1, (hereinafter ACHR); T. Antkowiak, A. Gonza, *The American Convention on Human Rights: Essential Rights*, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 231–232.

⁶⁴ See Section 2.3.

⁶⁵ See Sections 2.1, 2.2, and 2.4.

⁶⁶ See ACHR, art. 13, para. 2.

⁶⁷ See T. Antkowiak, A. Gonza, *The American Convention on Human Rights: Essential Rights*, Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 25–26.

⁶⁸ See ACHR, art. 13, para. 2.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, para. 3.

⁷⁰ See T. Buergenthal, “The Inter-American Court of Human Rights”, in *American Journal of International Law*, Vol. 76, No. 2, 1982, pp. 231–245.

⁷¹ See Inter-American Court of Human Rights, *Compulsory Membership in an Association Prescribed by Law for the Practice of Journalism*, Advisory Opinion OC-5/85, 13 November 1985, Series A No. 5, para. 50.

democratic society rests”. In the same opinion, the IACtHR emphasised that freedom of expression has both an individual dimension, which ensures that every person can express their thoughts, and a social dimension, that guarantees society’s collective right to receive diverse information and alternative viewpoints⁷². This twofold conception has become a defining element of the Inter-American jurisprudence and has been repeatedly reaffirmed in later cases involving censorship, media regulation, and political speech. Indeed, a prominent example regarding the importance of open discourse is embodied by *Herrera-Ulloa v. Costa Rica*, in which the Court reiterated that a democratic community requires a particularly high level of protection for speech relating to matters of public interest, including criticism of public officials. The IACtHR has consistently rejected restrictions that could have a “chilling effect” on civic debate, underscoring that pluralism and exchange of ideas are essential components of popular legitimacy⁷³. At the same time, the ACHR recognises that freedom of expression is not absolute by mandating limitations against severe abuses. Under Article 13, para. 5, “any propaganda for war and any advocacy of national, racial, or religious hatred that constitute incitements to lawless violence or to any other similar action” must be prohibited by law⁷⁴. However, even in this context, the Court has tended to interpret restrictions narrowly, ensuring that limitations do not undermine the essential role of expression in a free society. According to doctrinal analysis, this approach reflects a strong presumption in favour of open discourse, grounded in the historical experience of censorship and authoritarian control in the region⁷⁵. Therefore, the ACHR represents one of the most developed and speech-protective systems in the entire globe. Through its intricate architecture, the Inter-American model provides an important counterpoint to more restrictive regulatory regimes, viewing freedom of expression not merely as an isolated individual liberty, but as the structural cornerstone upon which the entire democratic constitutional order of the Americas relies.

3. Current and Future Goals of Political Correctness

At present, political correctness is generally perceived as a normative framework aimed at promoting respectful and inclusive forms of communication among increasingly diverse

⁷² *Ibid.*, paras. 30–33.

⁷³ See *Herrera-Ulloa v. Costa Rica*, Series C No. 107, IACtHR 2 July 2004, paras. 113–119.

⁷⁴ ACHR, art. 13, para. 5.

⁷⁵ See L. Hennebel, H. Tigroudja, *The American Convention on Human Rights: A Commentary*, Oxford University Press, 2022, pp. 431–465.

communities. Although definitions vary considerably across academic and societal contexts, its contemporary objectives are commonly associated with reducing discriminatory vocabulary, challenging stereotypes, and fostering cultural settings in which individuals are treated with equal dignity and respect, regardless of characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. In this regard, political correctness extends beyond mere linguistic etiquette and reflects a broader concern with the social consequences of language and representation. As Fairclough observes, debates surrounding political correctness are often centered on the relationship between language, culture, and social inequality, highlighting the capacity of discourse to both reproduce and challenge existing structures of exclusion⁷⁶. Similarly, Dzenis and Faria argue that such a paradigm seeks to reconcile the liberal commitment to individual freedom with the protection of vulnerable groups from forms of expression conceived as degrading or exclusionary⁷⁷. Having become an established feature of public debate, political correctness now increasingly influences educational institutions, workplaces, media, entertainment, political debate, and conversations, thereby providing the foundation upon which its future developments continue to unfold.

In recent years, political correctness has progressively evolved beyond its original function of encouraging inclusive and non-discriminatory vocabulary, progressively becoming intertwined with the regulation of digital communication and social media platforms. While its traditional objectives—namely the promotion of equality, inclusion, and sensitivity towards historically marginalised groups—remain central, current evolutions demonstrate that political correctness is now structurally embedded within systemic algorithmic governance and content moderation frameworks⁷⁸. The rise of social media platforms has significantly amplified both the influence and the visibility of its norms, transforming them from relatively localised cultural expectations into global and instantaneous standards of communication. As contemporary discourse migrates to automated networked ecosystems, political correctness’ focus shifts from retrospective social censorship to the proactive engineering of online spaces⁷⁹. Furthermore, the forward-looking agenda of the movement increasingly intersects with the mechanics of digital polarisation and “cancel culture”⁸⁰.

⁷⁶ N. Fairclough, “Political Correctness: The Politics of Culture and Language”, in *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2003, pp. 17–21.

⁷⁷ S. Dzenis, F. N. Faria, “Political Correctness: the Twofold Protection of Liberalism”, in *Philosophia*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2020, pp. 95–101.

⁷⁸ See K. Klonick, “The New Governors: The People, Rules, and Processes Governing Online Speech”, in *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 131, No. 6, 2018, pp. 1630–1635.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ See M. Thiele, “Political correctness and Cancel Culture – a question of power!”, in *Journalism Research*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2021, pp. 52–55; “cancel culture” will be examined in depth in Chapter 3, Section 2.

In this context, virtual platforms have become central actors in determining the practical boundaries of acceptable speech.

One of the most significant novel manifestations of political correctness concerns the growing role of private corporations in moderating online expression. Social media companies such as X, Meta, YouTube, and TikTok increasingly adopt policies aimed at combating hate speech, misinformation, exclusionary rhetoric, and harmful content. Contemporary configurations of the paradigm are closely connected to broader dynamics of digital power, where visibility, reputational pressure, and collective reactions contribute to shaping behavioural norms within virtual communities⁸¹. Consequently, the regulation of speech is no longer exercised exclusively through legal systems or state institutions, but also via private moderation policies, algorithmic filtering, and forms of social sanction commonly associated with “cancel culture”. This evolution raises complex questions concerning the future balance of freedom of expression with the protection of dignity within online environments. Unlike traditional legal restrictions, digital forms of political correctness often operate through decentralised and informal mechanisms, including public criticism, coordinated web-based campaigns, deplatforming, or reputational consequences—epitomized by “cancel culture”—affecting individuals outside formal judicial procedures⁸². Such developments reveal that the future trajectory of political correctness may depend less on direct legal regulation and more on the interaction between technological infrastructures, public opinion, and private governance of communication spaces. At the same time, its proponents maintain that these dynamics may contribute to reducing oppressive discourse and creating safer networked environments for vulnerable users, particularly within virtual spaces characterised by widespread participation and rapid dissemination of content⁸³. Critics, however, warn that excessive institutional pressure risks discouraging open debate and fostering self-censorship, especially where the boundaries of acceptable speech remain uncertain⁸⁴. The future evolution of political correctness will, therefore, likely depend on the capacity of liberal democracies to preserve this balance without allowing the defence of one value to entirely suppress the other.

Ultimately, the expansion of the movement into digital communication illustrates how debates surrounding language and expression are becoming inseparable from broader questions concerning

⁸¹ See M. Thiele, “Political correctness and Cancel Culture – a question of power!”, in *Journalism Research*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2021, pp. 52–55.

⁸² See K. Klonick, “The New Governors: The People, Rules, and Processes Governing Online Speech”, in *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 131, No. 6, 2018, pp. 1599–1670.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

technological governance, social accountability, and civic participation. Since online platforms increasingly function as the primary arenas of public discourse, the tension between freedom of speech and the regulation of harmful discourse is poised to remain one of the defining legal and cultural challenges of contemporary democratic societies. This framework operates not just as a defensive shield against marginalisation, but as an active tool of discursive power designed to deconstruct traditional societal hierarchies and reshape informational landscapes⁸⁵. Hence, the horizon of political correctness involves an ongoing struggle over who controls algorithmic parameters, establishing a computational environment where linguistic vigilance is built directly into the software of public communication⁸⁶.

⁸⁵ See N. Fairclough, “Political Correctness: The Politics of Culture and Language”, in *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2003, pp. 18–24.

⁸⁶ See K. Klonick, “The New Governors: The People, Rules, and Processes Governing Online Speech”, in *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 131, No. 6, 2018, pp. 1631–1635.

Chapter 2 Arguments Surrounding Political Correctness and the Prospects of a Potential Coexistence

1. Arguments in Favour of Political Correctness

Political correctness is upheld because its proponents believe that language is not neutral, that speech can contribute to the maintenance of social inequalities, and that modifying communicative practices may cultivate more inclusive manifestations of social interaction⁸⁷. The arguments advanced in support of political correctness are largely rooted in the belief that language is not merely a passive instrument for describing reality, but a primary site of social construction and power dynamics capable of shaping perceptions, attitudes, and relationships within society. From this perspective, patterns of communication do not simply reflect existing social hierarchies, but actively reinforce or dismantle them, meaning that exclusionary forms of expression may consolidate existing disparities, whereas egalitarian ones could subvert them. Therefore, advocates of political correctness contend that encouraging more inclusive discourse is not simply a matter of politeness or etiquette, but embodies an attempt to promote conditions of equal dignity and participation within increasingly pluralistic societies⁸⁸. Such an approach draws, at least indirectly, upon a broader intellectual tradition that regards language as constitutive of social reality. In this view, regulating the public sphere is not a restriction on liberty, but a prerequisite for it, fostering an inclusive communicative space where all individuals can participate meaningfully; indeed, true freedom of speech cannot exist if certain groups are silenced or deterred by pervasive hostility. Accordingly, political correctness is frequently presented as a mechanism through which historically disadvantaged communities may achieve greater social recognition and protection from forms of symbolic harm that have often been overlooked by traditional legal frameworks⁸⁹.

Its proponents further argue that the paradigm fulfills an important democratic function by promoting conditions of mutual respect necessary for equitable public deliberation⁹⁰. Instead of viewing freedom of expression and impartiality as inherently conflicting values, many advocates of the movement maintain that the effective exercise of free speech presupposes a social environment

⁸⁷ See N. Fairclough, *Language and Power*, Longman, 1989, pp. 20–36, 90–93.

⁸⁸ J. Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 1–6, 85–89; S. Dzenis, F. N. Faria, “Political Correctness: the Twofold Protection of Liberalism”, in *Philosophia*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2020, pp. 95–99.

⁸⁹ See J. Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, Harvard University Press, 2012, p. 39, 106.

⁹⁰ A. Gutmann, D. Thompson, *Democracy and disagreement*, Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 52–79.

in which all participants are able to engage in open debate without being systematically subjected to hostility, degradation, or exclusion⁹¹. Under this interpretation, political correctness is not conceived as an alternative to liberal principles, but rather as an effort to realise them completely by addressing forms of communicative inequality that may undermine genuine participation in civic and daily life. Another argument frequently raised by supporters of this phenomenon pertains to the educational and cultural effects of public discourse⁹². Language norms are often understood as vehicles through which societies convey shared values and expectations. Consequently, discouraging utterances perceived as discriminatory may contribute to the gradual development of more inclusive social attitudes and a greater awareness of minority groups' realities. From this perspective, political correctness functions not as a system of coercive censorship, but as a mode of collective self-regulation intended to encourage reflection upon the consequences of one's linguistic choices. While its proponents generally acknowledge that disagreements could arise concerning the boundaries of acceptable expression, they maintain that such debates should not obscure the wider objective of nurturing a public arena characterised by civility, mutual respect, and equal recognition⁹³.

Fundamentally, the principal arguments in favour of political correctness derive from a common normative premise: specifically, that language possesses social implications capable of affecting the distribution of dignity, recognition, and opportunities within society. To the extent that communicative practices contribute to the maintenance of exclusionary structures, advocates argue that attempts to reform those habits represent a legitimate means of promoting equality and protecting vulnerable communities⁹⁴. Whether these objectives can be pursued without imposing disproportionate constraints upon freedom of expression remains a matter of significant controversy. Nevertheless, understanding the rationale proposed by supporters of political correctness is essential before assessing the criticisms directed against it and the broader tensions that emerge between egalitarianism and freedom within contemporary polities.

⁹¹ S. Dzenis, F. N. Faria, "Political Correctness: the Twofold Protection of Liberalism", in *Philosophia*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2020, pp. 95–111.

⁹² See D. Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene*, Routledge, 1995, pp. 118–122, 155–165; N. Fairclough, "Political Correctness: The Politics of Culture and Language", in *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2003, pp. 18–24.

⁹³ A. Gutmann, D. Thompson, *Democracy and disagreement*, Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 52–79.

⁹⁴ See D. Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene*, Routledge, 1995, pp. 119–139, 155–165; N. Fairclough, "Political Correctness: The Politics of Culture and Language", in *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2003, pp. 17–21.

1.1 An Analytical Breakdown of the Arguments

Having sketched the general contentions in favour of political correctness, it is now worth shifting to a scrutiny of its core tenets, which encompass those already mentioned alongside additional key perspectives.

The first and perhaps most foundational argument advanced in favour of political correctness concerns the constitutive relationship between language and social reality. Drawing on the tradition of critical discourse analysis, scholars have argued that linguistic choices possess symbolic power: the words and categories employed by institutions, public authorities, media organisations, and ordinary citizens to depict collectivities do not merely label pre-existing realities but actively construct them, shaping the perceptions, attitudes, and expectations of both speakers and audiences. Norman Fairclough, whose work represents one of the most systematic elaborations of this position, contends that discourse simultaneously reflects and reproduces relations of dominance, meaning that the habitual use of demeaning or exclusionary terminology tends to naturalise the subordination of the groups so described⁹⁵. From this premise, proponents of political correctness derive a straightforward normative conclusion: if language can entrench inequality, then reforming it constitutes a legitimate—and indeed necessary—instrument of social change. Accordingly, the adoption of more inclusive forms of expression is often viewed as a means of acknowledging the experiences and perspectives of groups that have traditionally played a marginal role throughout public discourse. This rationale resonates with broader theories of recognition developed by Axel Honneth, who believes that social conflicts frequently arise from struggles for affirmation and respect rather than from material inequalities alone⁹⁶. Although Honneth does not write specifically about political correctness, his framework provides a valuable lens to explain why advocates regard linguistic reform as an important instrument for promoting integration and combating manifestations of exclusion. Fairclough develops this point further in a later article expressly devoted to the topic, maintaining that the ideology behind political correctness is inseparable from a comprehensive cultural project aimed at altering the symbolic conditions under which social collectivities are recognised and evaluated⁹⁷.

⁹⁵ N. Fairclough, *Language and Power*, Longman, 1989, pp. 90–93.

⁹⁶ A. Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*, Polity Press, 1995, pp. 31–63.

⁹⁷ N. Fairclough, “Political Correctness: The Politics of Culture and Language”, in *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2003, pp. 17–21.

A second line of inquiry focuses on the concept of dignity and the particular harms inflicted by disparaging discursive patterns. While classical liberal theories of free speech have traditionally centered around preventing direct censorship by public authorities, advocates of the paradigm maintain that language can generate forms of injury that extend beyond immediate physical or legal consequences⁹⁸. In particular, they contend that persistent exposure to degrading stereotypes, derogatory labels, or stigmatising rhetoric may contribute to the social marginalisation of targeted minorities by reinforcing prejudicial attitudes and normalising disparate treatment. Jeremy Waldron has offered the most philosophically rigorous articulation of this stance, distinguishing carefully between the protection of dignity and the mere prevention of offence. In his account, the harm caused by hate speech⁹⁹ and oppressive language does not consist primarily in the psychological distress it produces in its immediate targets, but in the broader damage it inflicts upon the social status of the groups concerned, depriving their members of the assurance that they will be treated as equals entitled to participate fully in everyday civic life¹⁰⁰. This dignitary approach has important implications for the political correctness debate: if exclusionary language operates as an ongoing assault on the undiminished public reputation of vulnerable groups, then efforts to discourage its use are not paternalistic restrictions on free expression but rather preconditions for the genuine equality that liberal societies profess to uphold. Waldron's argument also addresses the limitations of traditional legal frameworks in this regard, suggesting that the harms in question have frequently been rendered invisible by doctrinal categories—such as the distinction between speech and action—that were not designed with these forms of injury in mind¹⁰¹.

Closely connected to the previous argument, a third one pertains to the civic function of communicative norms. Theorists of deliberative democracy have emphasised that meaningful public deliberation is not simply a matter of formal access to debate, but necessitates substantive conditions of mutual respect and accountability among participants. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson argue that the moral foundation of the democratic forum is reciprocity, and this cardinal value demands that citizens engage with one another on terms which validate their equal footing as participants in collective self-governance¹⁰². On such an account, persistently hostile or degrading

⁹⁸ See M. J. Matsuda, "Public Response to Racist Speech: Considering the Victim's Story", in *Michigan Law Review*, Vol. 87, No. 8, 1989, pp. 2336–2341; J. Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 1–6, 85–89.

⁹⁹ This topic will be explored further in Chapter 3, Section 1.

¹⁰⁰ J. Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 105–116.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid*, pp. 37–39.

¹⁰² A. Gutmann, D. Thompson, *Democracy and disagreement*, Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 52–79.

forms of expression do not merely offend subjective sensibilities but undermine the structural conditions under which genuinely free and egalitarian deliberation is possible. Advocates of political correctness have leveraged this logic to argue that regulating certain verbal practices is not an imposition upon constitutional freedoms but a means of protecting them¹⁰³. Consequently, meaningful free speech requires conditions in which individuals are truly capable of entering public debate and making their voices heard. Where public discourse becomes dominated by racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise alienating modes of utterance, members of affected constituencies may be discouraged from participating on symmetrical terms. Proponents, therefore, contend that certain standards associated with political correctness contribute to the creation of a more inclusive public sphere in which civic discourse can occur under conditions of reciprocal respect¹⁰⁴. Similar concerns can be found in the work of Mari Matsuda, who emphasises the importance of considering the perspective of victims of racist invective and holds that traditional free speech doctrines have often underestimated the cumulative effects of discriminatory expression upon those who are repeatedly exposed to it¹⁰⁵.

Furthermore, a fourth contention addresses the educative and cultural dimension of language norms. Its supporters challenge the assumption that political correctness necessarily entails censorship¹⁰⁶. In their view, many of the practices commonly associated with it operate chiefly through social persuasion as opposed to legal coercion. Educational campaigns, revised institutional guidelines, inclusive terminology policies, and public criticism of derogatory statements are often presented as examples of democratic polities negotiating evolving criteria of respect and equality. From this standpoint, political correctness represents not an attempt to suppress disagreement, but an effort to encourage greater awareness of the consequences of language. Deborah Cameron, while approaching the question analytically rather than normatively, demonstrates that endeavours to regulate discourse always encode particular social values and that the movement linked to the practice reflects a serious initiative to alter the symbolic environment within which attitudes towards underprivileged minorities are formed¹⁰⁷. The underlying intuition—that changing the

¹⁰³ See *Ibid*; S. Dzenis, F. N. Faria, “Political Correctness: the Twofold Protection of Liberalism”, in *Philosophia*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2020, pp. 95–111.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*.

¹⁰⁵ M. J. Matsuda, “Public Response to Racist Speech: Considering the Victim’s Story”, in *Michigan Law Review*, Vol. 87, No. 8, 1989, pp. 2336–2341.

¹⁰⁶ See D. Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene*, Routledge, 1995, pp. 155–165; S. Dzenis, F. N. Faria, “Political Correctness: the Twofold Protection of Liberalism”, in *Philosophia*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2020, pp. 95–111.

¹⁰⁷ See D. Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene*, Routledge, 1995, pp. 119–139, 155–165.

words a community routinely deploys may gradually reshape the assumptions embedded in those words—draws implicitly on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis and its more moderate descendants, which suggest that linguistic categories influence, even if they do not fully determine, the cognitive matrices through which reality is perceived and organised¹⁰⁸. Judith Butler similarly observes that speech acts possess performative dimensions adept at shaping social realities and at modulating the status accorded to particular groups within society¹⁰⁹. Although Butler’s work does not constitute a direct defence of political correctness, it provides theoretical support for the proposition that linguistic conventions are poised to produce tangible effects and thus warrant critical examination.

Taken together, these lines of reasoning reveal that the endorsement for this phenomenon is founded upon a wider understanding of the relationship between language, power, and social equality. Instead of viewing speech exclusively as an individual liberty interest, proponents highlight its collective ramifications and its aptitude to condition the distribution of dignity, recognition, and participation within democratic arenas. It is precisely this conception of discourse as a socially consequential practice that underpins many contemporary defences of political correctness and distinguishes them from more traditional libertarian approaches to freedom of expression.

2. Arguments Against Political Correctness

Moving beyond the principal arguments advanced in vindication of political correctness, it is now necessary to turn to the objections raised by its detractors, who have challenged both the theoretical premises and the practical consequences of the movement from a variety of intellectual viewpoints. Dissenters interrogate many of the assumptions upon which supporters rely, asserting that the paradigm risks undermining the very values of liberty, pluralism, and democratic deliberation that it purports to further¹¹⁰.

The most immediate and enduring line of criticism concerns the relationship between political correctness and freedom of expression. From a classical liberal perspective, the imposition of constraints upon permissible speech—whether through legal prohibition, institutional regulation, or organised social pressure—represents a fundamental threat to the open exchange of ideas upon

¹⁰⁸ B. L. Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality*, The MIT Press, 1956, pp. 87–111, 147–159.

¹⁰⁹ J. Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Routledge, 1997, pp. 141–163.

¹¹⁰ See G. Lukianoff, J. Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*, Penguin Press, 2018, pp. 195–212; J. Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, Brookings Institution Press, 2021, pp. 189–231.

which both individual autonomy and civic self-governance depend. Opponents argue that efforts to discourage certain forms of discourse often extend beyond the prevention of genuine harm and increasingly encompass the curtailment of controversial, unpopular, or dissenting orientations¹¹¹. In this regard, political correctness is frequently accused of transforming subjective perceptions of offence into standards capable of restricting legitimate public debate. Defenders of expansive free speech hold that pluralistic societies depend upon the unfettered contestation of conceptions and that the suppression of expression, even when motivated by commendable objectives, may ultimately weaken intellectual pluralism¹¹². This concern echoes the classical arguments advanced by John Stuart Mill, who maintained that the collision of competing opinions constitutes an indispensable mechanism for discovering truth and preventing prevailing orthodoxies from becoming dogmatic. The author further contended that the silencing of any idea, however offensive or erroneous it may appear, deprives society of the opportunity to test its own beliefs against opposition and to refine them through reasoned debate. Sceptics of political correctness have repeatedly invoked such a framework to assert that the movement's ambition to regulate discourse produces an atmosphere of intellectual conformity incompatible with genuine freedom of thought. Importantly, this objection is directed not solely at legal restrictions but at the informal mechanisms of stigmatisation and ostracism through which certain modes of utterance are effectively suppressed, what Mill himself described as “the tyranny of the majority”¹¹³. In this light, the liberal critique of political correctness targets the very instruments—social persuasion, institutional guidelines, public censure—that its defenders regard as legitimate and non-coercive. Contemporary challengers frequently invoke a similar rationale, contending that political correctness may create environments in which individuals refrain from expressing lawful opinions due to fear of social condemnation, professional repercussions, or reputational harm¹¹⁴.

A second and related objection addresses the epistemic consequences of restricting discourse. Detractors argue that the designation of certain statements as impermissible does not eliminate the attitudes they express but merely relegates them from public view, thereby impeding the open

¹¹¹ G. Lukianoff, J. Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*, Penguin Press, 2018, pp. 195–212;

¹¹² G. Lukianoff, J. Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*, Penguin Press, 2018, pp. 195–212; J. Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, Brookings Institution Press, 2021, pp. 189–231.

¹¹³ See J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 1–99.

¹¹⁴ See G. Lukianoff, J. Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*, Penguin Press, 2018, pp. 195–212; J. Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, Brookings Institution Press, 2021, pp. 189–231.

confrontation through which prejudice can be examined and refuted¹¹⁵. Jonathan Rauch develops this argument stating that the liberal science of knowledge production depends on the principle that no opinion is immune from challenge, and that well-intentioned efforts to protect vulnerable groups from offensive speech ultimately undermine the epistemic culture which makes genuine progress against bias possible¹¹⁶. From this perspective, the proponents' claim that political correctness promotes greater awareness of minority realities is contested at its root: awareness achieved through the repression of contrary views, critics maintain, is fragile and superficial compared to the understanding generated by genuinely unrestricted debate¹¹⁷. Furthermore, whereas advocates contend that communicative norms facilitate more inclusive participation, opponents argue that excessive sensitivity towards potentially offensive language may itself compromise democratic deliberation by narrowing the range of views considered socially acceptable¹¹⁸. Such a concern is particularly evident in discussions surrounding so-called “cancel culture”¹¹⁹, where critics hold that informal mechanisms of social sanction—including public shaming, coordinated online campaigns, and reputational pressure—may discourage individuals from expressing legitimate ideas on contentious matters¹²⁰. In this respect, scholars such as Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt have asserted that political correctness has generated significant counterproductive consequences for civic culture. The authors observed that contemporary tendencies towards speech regulation can foster environments characterised by self-censorship and intellectual conformity, thus contributing to political polarisation and the delegitimisation of mainstream institutions. Specifically, campus milieux shaped by the movement have produced measurable adverse effects on intellectual resilience and openness to disagreement among young people, with implications extending well beyond educational bodies into the broader public sphere¹²¹. According to both critiques,

¹¹⁵ See J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 1–99.

¹¹⁶ See J. Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, Brookings Institution Press, 2021, pp. 189–231.

¹¹⁷ See J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 1–99.

¹¹⁸ See G. Lukianoff, J. Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*, Penguin Press, 2018, pp. 195–212; J. Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, Brookings Institution Press, 2021, pp. 189–231.

¹¹⁹ For a comprehensive discussion of this issue, see Chapter 3, Section 2.

¹²⁰ See G. Lukianoff, J. Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*, Penguin Press, 2018, pp. 195–212; J. Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, Brookings Institution Press, 2021, pp. 189–231.

¹²¹ See G. Lukianoff, J. Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*, Penguin Press, 2018, pp. 125–141, 195–212.

democratic discourse benefits not from the elimination of conflict and discomfort, but from the capacity of citizens to confront dissent and engage constructively with challenging perspectives.

A third line of inquiry interacts directly with Waldron's dignitary framework and the notion of symbolic harm. While few serious critics deny that hate speech and degrading expressions can cause genuine injury, several scholars have doubted whether the concept of dignity guarantees a sufficiently precise or stable criterion for limiting speech in pluralistic societies. *Pace* Waldron, academics like Brian Leiter have frontally called into question the coherence of dignitarian-based boundaries, contending that his distinction between dignitary harm and mere offence is neither tenable nor clearly delineated, and that the theorist does not adequately explain why this particular injury—as opposed to other harms suffered by disadvantaged communities—should warrant legal redress¹²². A wider version of this rebuttal is articulated by Nadine Strossen, who argues that hate speech regulations consistently fail their avowed objectives: empirical evidence suggests that such measures are disproportionately enforced against the minority collectivities they purport to safeguard, and that the nominal reassurance they provide comes at the cost of authentic legal equality¹²³. In addition, Ronald Dworkin affirmed that democratic legitimacy requires the protection of free communication even when discourse is offensive, provocative, or deeply unsettling, because citizens must remain free to participate in public discourse without prior approval from prevailing moral authorities¹²⁴. By this token, attempts to shield individuals from symbolic injuries risk creating a hierarchy of protected sensibilities in which the preservation of subjective dignity is elevated above the collective interest in unfettered public discussion. Detractors, therefore, maintain that the appropriate response to objectionable speech is generally counterspeech rather than suppression, a principle that has long occupied a central role within liberal theories of expression.

Fourthly, critics have challenged the dialogical egalitarian thesis advanced by Gutmann, Thompson, and others. The claim that political correctness enhances the quality of public deliberation by ensuring conditions of mutual respect has been contested on the grounds that it conflates civility with conformity. Stanley Fish, one of the most incisive dissenters of the movement, argues that appeals to decorum and reciprocal recognition are never ideologically neutral but invariably encode the communicative norms of particular social groups, thereby

¹²² B. Leiter, "Waldron on the Regulation of Hate Speech", *Public Law & Legal Theory Working Paper*, No. 398, University of Chicago Law School, 2012, pp. 4–11.

¹²³ N. Strossen, "Freedom of Speech and Equality: Do We Have to Choose?", in *Journal of Law and Policy*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2016, pp. 211–218.

¹²⁴ R. Dworkin, *Freedom's Law: The Moral Reading of the American Constitution*, Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 205–207.

advantaging those already comfortable with dominant discursive conventions while marginalising more confrontational or unconventional modes of utterance. On Fish's account, the deliberative ideal invoked by proponents of political correctness does not transcend conflict but represents one side of it, dressed in the language of procedural neutrality¹²⁵.

A fifth and final criticism addresses the educative and cultural argument directly. Opponents contend that the gradualist hypothesis—that modifying linguistic practices will progressively reshape social biases—rests upon empirical assumptions that remain largely unverified and theoretically contested¹²⁶. Steven Pinker, drawing on cognitive science and psycholinguistics, has maintained that the relationship between language and thought posited by strong versions of the Sapir-Whorf conjecture is not supported by the available data, and that the cyclical phenomenon he terms the “euphemism treadmill”—whereby new inclusive terms progressively acquire the negative connotations of the locutions they replace—indicates that the underlying attitudes driving discriminatory speech cannot be neutralised through lexical substitution alone¹²⁷. From this perspective, the cultural and educative benefits attributed to political correctness may be predominantly illusory, targeting the surface of language while leaving deeper structures of prejudice intact. Although they acknowledge the existence of disparaging discourse and the need to combat bias, detractors question whether the governance of linguistic habits constitutes an appropriate or effective means of achieving such aims¹²⁸. Proponents tend to regard speech as a constitutive force capable of moulding structural realities; in contrast, critics caution against attributing excessive causal power to language itself¹²⁹. Under this view, political correctness risks exaggerating the influence of words whilst neglecting the economic, institutional, and cultural factors that contribute to inequality. John McWhorter, for instance, asserts that contemporary forms of lexical regulation often operate on the supposition that modifying vocabulary will produce substantial social transformation, despite limited evidence that changes in terminology alone can address deeper systemic disparities¹³⁰. Similarly, Deborah Cameron observes that linguistic reforms

¹²⁵ S. Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech: and it's a good thing, too*, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 89–99.

¹²⁶ See S. Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The modern denial of human nature*, Viking, 2002, pp. 212–214; J. McWhorter, *The Language Hoax: Why the World Looks the Same in Any Language*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 136–168.

¹²⁷ S. Pinker, *The Blank Slate: The modern denial of human nature*, Viking, 2002, pp. 212–214.

¹²⁸ N. Strossen, “Freedom of Speech and Equality: Do We Have to Choose?”, in *Journal of Law and Policy*, Vol. 25, No. 1, 2016, pp. 211–218.

¹²⁹ See *Ibid*; N. Fairclough, “Political Correctness: The Politics of Culture and Language”, in *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2003, pp. 17–21.

¹³⁰ J. McWhorter, *The Language Hoax: Why the World Looks the Same in Any Language*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 136–168.

frequently create the appearance of egalitarian progress without necessarily resolving the underlying conditions that fostered exclusion in the first place¹³¹. Although advocates frequently portray communicative adjustments as a process of persuasion instead of coercion, dissenters hold that the distinction between the two is often less clear in practice¹³². Social norms, institutional policies, and informal pressures may collectively generate powerful incentives for conformity, even in the absence of legal sanctions. In this regard, Robert Hughes famously argued that political correctness threatens to evolve into a form of cultural orthodoxy that seeks to police acceptable opinion through the disciplining of language¹³³. Parallel apprehensions have been raised by scholars who admonish that the pursuit of inclusivity may inadvertently encourage self-censorship and discourage intellectual risk-taking, thereby impoverishing public discourse rather than enriching it. Consequently, the central danger of political correctness lies not in its commitment to equality or respect, but in the possibility that these objectives may be attained by means of mechanisms subverting the openness and diversity of standpoints upon which democratic societies ultimately depend.

Synthesising these rebuttals, it becomes evident that they reveal a fundamentally diverse conception of the interplay between language, power, and freedom. Whereas proponents of political correctness emphasise the harmful consequences of speech and the need to protect vulnerable groups from exclusionary discourse, its opponents prioritise the preservation of verbal liberty and warn against the expansion of social or institutional controls over language. The resulting disagreement is therefore not merely empirical but normative, reflecting competing visions of how constitutional polities should balance the values of equality, dignity, and freedom of expression.

3. Freedom of Speech and Political Correctness: A Relationship Bound to Last?

The relationship between freedom of speech and political correctness is considerably more complex than the dichotomous depiction often found in public debate. Rather than constituting inherently incompatible concepts, the two may operate in a complementary manner under certain conditions while coming into tension under others. Much of the contemporary controversy surrounding political correctness stems precisely from this dual character: it is simultaneously defended as a

¹³¹ See D. Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene*, Routledge, 1995, pp. 155–165.

¹³² See S. Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech: and it's a good thing, too*, Oxford University Press, 1994, pp. 89–99.

¹³³ R. Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America*, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 17–26.

mechanism capable of facilitating meaningful participation in public discourse and criticised as a source of constraints poised to limit the openness upon which such dialogue depends. Consequently, the interaction of freedom of expression with the paradigm must be assessed by moving beyond abstract normative claims and examined through the empirical effects that linguistic norms produce within the dynamics of open deliberation.

In a narrow sense, political correctness—understood as a set of conventions discouraging gratuitously demeaning language—can be said to support as opposed to undermine free speech, contributing positively to its exercise by addressing barriers that prevent certain individuals and groups from engaging effectively in civic discussion. The rationale, already encountered in its theoretical form, rests on the observation that speech is not exercised in a vacuum but within a social environment that can itself be more or less conducive to participation. Where certain communities face persistent derision, mockery, or exclusion through verbal means, their practical capacity to contribute to public discourse on equal terms may be diminished, even where no formal legal barrier exists; unremitting hostility, degrading stereotypes, or systematic exclusion may discourage members of vulnerable groups from speaking, thereby reducing the diversity of viewpoints represented within participatory debate. Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson’s account of deliberative democracy is instructive here: reciprocity and mutual respect are not incidental courtesies but structural preconditions for the kind of exchange that this model requires¹³⁴. Under such an interpretation, political correctness functions not as a restriction upon expression but as an instrument designed to broaden access to it. Empirically, this pattern is visible in contexts where underprivileged collectivities historically withdrew from public arena not because they were legally silenced, but because the social cost of engagement—ridicule, harassment, professional retaliation—was too high. Norm-based discouragement of specific modes of utterance can, in these cases, serve as an enabling rather than a restrictive mechanism, lowering the practical threshold for participation instead of raising it. Similar apprehensions emerge in Jeremy Waldron’s analysis of dignity and recognition of status, according to which the social standing of persons as equal members of the community constitutes a precondition for their meaningful involvement in civic life¹³⁵. Although Waldron’s work primarily concerns hate speech, the broader principle is relevant here: particular communicative standards may strengthen freedom of expression by fostering an environment in which a greater number of individuals feel capable of exercising it. Robert Post has elaborated a convergent institutional argument: he notes that universities and professional

¹³⁴ A. Gutmann, D. Thompson, *Democracy and disagreement*, Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 52–79.

¹³⁵ J. Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 85–89, 105–116.

associations have long applied internal speech norms—stricter than those required by First Amendment doctrine—precisely to sustain the conditions necessary for the production and dissemination of credible knowledge within a “marketplace of ideas”¹³⁶. On this reading, certain modest forms of political correctness operate less as restrictions on discourse than as prerequisites for a kind of speech that is genuinely inclusive and exchange-enhancing.

However, the factual record also suggests that this logic does not scale indefinitely, and that beyond a given tipping point the relationship between the movement and free expression becomes markedly more adversarial. The clearest evidence for this comes from the phenomenon increasingly described as a “chilling effect”, whereby agents self-censor not due to legal prohibition but driven by a diffuse fear of social sanction. Jonathan Rauch’s empirical findings regarding campus culture offer a particularly informative illustration: surveys he cites indicate that a majority of students report a reluctance to discuss sensitive topics such as race, gender, or politics in the classroom, not owing to institutional guidelines but because of anticipated peer reaction¹³⁷. This data point is significant because it highlights that excessive political correctness can produce outcomes functionally analogous to censorship, despite operating through entirely informal and decentralised means. Unlike state-enforced bans, this variant of constraint is harder to identify, contest, or reform, inherently because it has no single identifiable author and no official mechanism of appeal. Such a curtailment often functions through social disapproval, reputational consequences, organisational sanctions, or forms of collective condemnation; these dynamics have become especially visible within digital spheres, where online platforms facilitate the rapid amplification of public criticism and the widespread propagation of moral judgments¹³⁸. Consequently, detractors contend that extralegal pressures and the anticipation of civic sanctions deter individuals from expressing lawful ideas on controversial matters, thereby narrowing the range of perspectives articulated in open debate. This concern is mirrored in Mill’s foundational warning against the tyranny exercised by popular sentiment as opposed to legislation. The author maintains that the contestation of prevailing opinions is indispensable for the discovery of truth and for preventing accepted beliefs from degenerating into unquestioned dogma¹³⁹. By this token, a democratic society benefits not only from the protection of mainstream or conventionally approved standpoints but also from the ability

¹³⁶ See R. Post, “Participatory Democracy and Free Speech”, in *Virginia Law Review*, Vol. 97, No. 3, 2011, pp. 477–489.

¹³⁷ See J. Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, Brookings Institution Press, 2021, pp. 189–231.

¹³⁸ See K. Klonick, “The New Governors: The People, Rules, and Processes Governing Online Speech”, in *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 131, No. 6, 2018, pp. 1599–1670.

¹³⁹ J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 1–99.

of dissenting and unpopular voices to dispute dominant assumptions. A further empirical complication regards the unintended political repercussions of overzealous linguistic regulation. Far from fostering the inclusive dispositions its proponents envision, an overly stringent implementation of political correctness norms appears, according to some research, to trigger backlash effects. Data adduced by Jonathan Rauch suggests that experimentally subjecting individuals to such conventions increased rather than decreased endorsement for figures and movements explicitly opposed to political correctness¹⁴⁰. If accurate, this finding complicates the straightforward narrative wherein more lexical governance reliably yields more egalitarian social attitudes; conversely, it evinces the existence of a threshold beyond which enforcement turns out to be counterproductive, entrenching instead of dissolving the very divisions it seeks to address. Similarly, Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt hold that cultural environments characterised by heightened sensitivity towards potentially offensive speech may inadvertently incentivise intellectual conformity and self-censorship, notably within educational bodies¹⁴¹.

This is not to say that the costs of political correctness are evenly distributed across its various guises. There is an important observational and conceptual distinction between the paradigm as a set of loosely followed social standards—encouraging speakers to consider the impact of their words—and its manifestation as an imposed regime of ideological orthodoxy, perpetuated through public shaming, deplatforming, or professional retaliation. The practical challenge, therefore, lies in identifying the point at which efforts to promote respectful communication cease to enhance participation and begin by contrast to restrict it. Political correctness appears most compatible with freedom of expression when it operates by means of persuasion, societal awareness, and voluntary adaptation of discursive practices. In such circumstances, citizens remain free to voice their disagreement while becoming more attentive to the effects that language may have on others. John McWhorter’s empirical insights about the limited efficacy of mandated vocabulary changes are relevant here, implying that even where the phenomenon fails to achieve its stated transformative goals, this failure does not necessarily translate into a meaningful infringement upon free speech, but rather into a milder issue of symbolic futility¹⁴². Yet, frictions emerge when evolving norms of acceptable utterance grow sufficiently rigid that deviation from them results in severe social or professional consequences irrespective of the substantive merit of the ideas advanced. At this

¹⁴⁰ J. Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, Brookings Institution Press, 2021, p. 14.

¹⁴¹ G. Lukianoff, J. Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*, Penguin Press, 2018, pp. 195–212.

¹⁴² J. McWhorter, *The Language Hoax: Why the World Looks the Same in Any Language*, Oxford University Press, 2014, pp. 136–168.

juncture, the distinction between fostering civil discourse and exacting doctrinal compliance becomes progressively difficult to maintain. Accordingly, it is chiefly the second form—coercive and enforced political correctness—that generates the sharpest tension with freedom of expression, since it is within such a dynamic that the tipping point separating communal norm-setting from informal censorship is unmistakably crossed.

Ultimately, the interaction of political correctness with free speech reveals a wider interplay between two values that liberal democracies seek simultaneously to safeguard: the promotion of equality and the preservation of personal liberty. The movement may facilitate the right to speak by reducing barriers to participation and cultivating a more inclusive public sphere; in its moderate iterations, it can plausibly be conceived as a precondition for egalitarian and authentically participatory civic discussion, consistent with the deliberative model propounded by Gutmann and Thompson. When pursued in an excessively expansive or intolerant manner, however, the factual evidence increasingly indicates that the paradigm produces self-silencing, backlash, and a contraction of the very collective debate it was originally intended to broaden. The question that persists, thus, is not whether political correctness as such is compatible with freedom of expression, but rather where the observational threshold dividing its enabling and its corrosive outcomes actually resides—a conundrum to which the specific cases of hate speech regulation and “cancel culture”, examined in the subsequent chapter, offer one of the most developed and contested answers. This ongoing indeterminacy raises another essential doubt, one implicit in the title of this precise section: is the relationship between political correctness and free speech a durable one, or are the two inevitably set on a collision course that no amount of calibration can resolve? Two broad solutions emerge from the foregoing analysis, neither of which is fully satisfying on its own. The first, more optimistic reading holds that the interplay is not merely durable but constitutive: that freedom of expression, properly understood, has never been a tenet sought in isolation from considerations of equal access and engagement, and that the phenomenon—at least in its tempered, non-coercive forms—simply articulates a prerequisite that liberal theories of free discourse have always implicitly demanded. Under this view, the apparent friction dividing the two values is, to a significant extent, an issue of degree and enforcement mechanism rather than an obstacle of fundamental incompatibility. Robert Post’s account of “marketplace of ideas”, which require internally negotiated norms in order to produce the very modes of utterance worth protecting, lends some support to this interpretation¹⁴³. If this is correct, then the nexus between political correctness

¹⁴³ See R. Post, “Participatory Democracy and Free Speech”, in *Virginia Law Review*, Vol. 97, No. 3, 2011, pp. 477–489.

and freedom of speech is “bound to last” in the strongest sense: the two will continue to coexist, mutually adjusting as social conventions evolve, without either one definitively eclipsing the other. The second, decidedly pessimistic perspective takes seriously the empirical findings of reactance, voluntary reticence, and communicative narrowing surveyed above, and concludes that the alignment is sustainable only within a strictly confined spectrum of regulatory intensity—a parameter that has historically proven hardly viable for civic movements to preserve. Factions oriented towards redressing perceived lexical and cultural injustices may possess an inherent tendency to expand, since the categories of offence and harm they invoke are not self-bounding: once the principle that language can wound is accepted, there is little non-arbitrary basis for determining when enough linguistic reform has been achieved. Jonathan Rauch’s explication of what might be depicted as a “ratchet effect” in norm enforcement speaks to this concern, suggesting that informal societal sanctions, upon being normalised as punitive and not corrective, are inclined to escalate instead of stabilising over time¹⁴⁴. Should this premise hold true, then the moderate, dialogue-enhancing version of political correctness delineated in the optimistic reading may be intrinsically unstable—a temporary equilibrium rather than a durable settlement, prone to drifting into the more coercive and speech-restrictive permutations discussed throughout this paragraph. Astride these two stances lies a third and modest possibility, which the present thesis is disposed to favour, although stopping short of offering a final verdict: that the relationship between political correctness and freedom of expression is not “bound to last” in any fixed institutional configuration, but is conversely bound to recur as a perennial negotiation, characteristic of liberal democracies’ broader and unresolved task of reconciling equality and liberty. Just as the boundary separating permissible and impermissible utterance has shifted across decades and ideological contexts—proliferating in eras of social mobilisation, contracting in periods of reaction—the specific accommodation between the paradigm and free discourse is unlikely to be permanently settled. What can be said with greater confidence is that the normative resources requisite to negotiate such a demarcation line remain at the disposal of pluralistic societies: the deliberative ideal of reciprocity defended by Gutmann and Thompson, the dignitarian commitment to undiminished standing elaborated by Waldron, and the epistemic caution against the foreclosure of dissent associated with Mill and Rauch all continue to provide competing but not necessarily incompatible vocabularies through which each new iteration of this debate can be conducted. Whether political correctness and freedom of speech are “bound to last” together may, therefore, be less a question to be answered in

¹⁴⁴ See J. Rauch, “The Cancel Culture Checklist”, in *Persuasion*, 2020, <https://www.persuasion.community/p/the-cancel-culture-checklist-c63>, (last accessed 9 July 2026).

the abstract than one to be continuously re-posed, in light of the distinct historical and structural pressures—scrutinised in the chapter that follows—under which the two tenets are made to coexist.

Chapter 3 Contested Manifestations: Hate Speech, Cancel Culture, and the Orbits of Artistic Creativity

1. Hate Speech: When Is It Too Much?

Among the various objectives attributed to political correctness, one of the most frequently cited is its potential contribution to preventing and counteracting hate speech. Within contemporary academic and legal discourse, hate speech is generally understood as a category of expression that vilifies, demeans, or incites hostility against groups or individuals on grounds such as race, ethnicity, religion, nationality, gender, sexual orientation, or other comparable markers. Consequently, this type of abuse is capable of promoting, legitimising, and reinforcing discrimination or violence. While definitions vary considerably and a universally accepted one does not prevail throughout different jurisdictions, the philosophical core of the concept, in the formulation advanced by Jeremy Waldron, pertains not to the subjective displeasure experienced by individual listeners but to a more systemic and communal form of injury. The author argues that the harm in hate speech consists in damage to the dignity of vulnerable people, depriving them of the assurance that they can count on being treated justly and that they are not deemed unworthy of equal citizenship. Crucially, this injury is not merely psychological but social and cumulative: as noted above, Waldron distinguishes the protection of dignity from the mitigation of sheer offence, contending that freedom of speech must entail a prerogative to disseminate unpleasant ideas, but that this is not the same as a licence to assault the civic status of members of disadvantaged collectivities. Under such a perspective, persistent and visible degradation of a group's standing constitutes a distinctive public bad—what the theorist calls damage to the “dignitary order of society”—rather than a private grievance to be weighed against the speaker's personal liberty interest¹⁴⁵.

It is in light of this theoretical background that supporters of political correctness—conceptualised as a set of social and institutional norms discouraging certain modalities of demeaning or exclusionary language which may contribute to the emergence or normalisation of hateful discourse before legal intervention becomes necessary—plausibly frame the movement as a preventive cultural mechanism, attributing to it a safeguarding function¹⁴⁶. If Waldron is correct that

¹⁴⁵ J. Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 92–94, 105–116.

¹⁴⁶ See D. Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene*, Routledge, 1995, pp. 155–165; J. Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 85–89, 105–116.

the unchecked proliferation of dehumanising speech erodes the assurance of egalitarian footing on which underprivileged groups depend, then standards that deter such utterances can be conceived as defending precisely the public good he identifies, namely the structural conditions of civic trust and equal participation. This connects directly to the deliberative argument discussed in the previous chapter¹⁴⁷: Amy Gutmann and Dennis Thompson’s account of reciprocity as the moral foundation of democratic deliberation implies that an environment saturated with hostile or degrading discourse does not solely offend individual sensibilities but actively undermines citizens’ capacity to engage in communal interchange on symmetrical terms¹⁴⁸. On such a reading, the deterrence of hate speech through informal and regulatory conventions—rather than necessarily through criminal law—serves a purpose that is not restrictive, but enabling: it sustains, instead of constraining, the parameters for genuinely inclusive discourse. The conceptual underpinnings of these positions largely rest upon the premise that language performs not purely a descriptive role but also a constitutive societal one. Given the assumption that patterns of communication influence the ways in which particular collectivities are perceived, repeated use of disparaging terminology or discriminatory stereotypes may gradually reinforce prejudicial attitudes and legitimise marginalising practices. Norman Fairclough asserts that discourse is complicit in the production and reproduction of social power relations, thereby contributing to the maintenance or transformation of existing inequalities¹⁴⁹. From this standpoint, political correctness seeks not simply to replace one vocabulary with another, but to promote modes of collective interaction less likely to perpetuate symbolic hierarchies that have historically facilitated mistreatment of vulnerable communities.

Its supporters further contend that the relationship between the paradigm and hate speech should be understood primarily as pre-emptive rather than punitive¹⁵⁰. Instead of relying exclusively on criminal sanctions or civil liability, political correctness operates through the progressive establishment of communal benchmarks that encourage greater awareness of the potential consequences of expression. Educational initiatives, institutional guidelines, professional codes of conduct, and evolving criteria of civic utterance are commonly regarded as instruments through which politics negotiate more egalitarian modalities of interchange. Deborah Cameron observes that attempts to regulate language invariably reflect wider social values and debates concerning equality,

¹⁴⁷ See Chapter 2, Sections 1.1 and 3.

¹⁴⁸ A. Gutmann, D. Thompson, *Democracy and disagreement*, Harvard University Press, 1996, pp. 52–79.

¹⁴⁹ N. Fairclough, *Language and Power*, Longman, 1989, pp. 90–93; N. Fairclough, “Political Correctness: The Politics of Culture and Language”, in *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2003, pp. 17–28.

¹⁵⁰ See J. Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 85–89, 105–116; S. Dzenis, F. N. Faria, “Political Correctness: the Twofold Protection of Liberalism”, in *Philosophia*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2020, pp. 95–111.

identity, and acceptable public behaviour¹⁵¹. Although the author does not advocate the phenomenon as a normative programme, her analysis illustrates how linguistic reforms frequently emerge from changing societal expectations as opposed to statutory coercion alone. Robert Post's line of inquiry, examined earlier in this thesis¹⁵², lends additional credence to this analytical outlook, albeit indirectly. He argues that epistemic institutions such as universities and scientific journals depend upon disciplined standards anchored in virtues including respect, fairness, accuracy, and civility, since unfettered freedom of thought by itself produces plain anarchy as distinct from knowledge¹⁵³. Whilst Post does not address hate speech frontally in this passage, the broader logic of his argument—that certain forms of valuable discursive cooperation hinge on internally enforced norms exceeding what generalised expressive liberty doctrine requires—provides a structural parallel to the case for curtailing or deterring hate speech within specific organisational settings, encompassing higher education bodies or workplaces, even where outright legal prohibition would be neither desirable nor constitutionally permissible.

The empirical dimension of this dispute, however, remains considerably less settled than its theoretical foundations: verbal conventions and public dispositions may shape one another, yet the precise nature and direction of this relationship are still contested. Studies in social psychology indicate that reiterated exposure to stereotypical or demeaning language could entrench implicit biases, while changes in communal standards concerning acceptable discourse can conduce to altering patterns of interpersonal interaction¹⁵⁴. At the same time, scholars generally acknowledge that lexical restructuring alone cannot eradicate prejudice or systemic inequality, which are predicated upon wider ideological, economic, and cultural factors¹⁵⁵. Consequently, proponents of political correctness rarely present inclusive vocabulary as an exhaustive solution to hate speech; rather, they regard it as one component of a larger strategy embracing pedagogical initiatives, institutional responsibility, and judicial shielding against the most serious forms of discriminatory expression¹⁵⁶. Granted that Waldron's formulation offers a sophisticated justification for treating

¹⁵¹ See D. Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene*, Routledge, 1995, pp. 15–17, 155–165.

¹⁵² See Chapter 2, Section 3.

¹⁵³ R. Post, “Participatory Democracy and Free Speech”, in *Virginia Law Review*, Vol. 97, No. 3, 2011, pp. 478–479.

¹⁵⁴ A. G. Greenwald, M. R. Banaji, “Implicit Social Cognition: Attitudes, Self-Esteem, and Stereotypes”, in *Psychological Review*, Volume. 102, No. 1, 1995, pp. 4–20.

¹⁵⁵ See N. Fairclough, *Language and Power*, Longman, 1989, pp. 20–36; D. Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene*, Routledge, 1995, pp. 119–139, 155–165.

¹⁵⁶ See D. Cameron, *Verbal Hygiene*, Routledge, 1995, pp. 155–165; United Nations, *United Nations Strategy and Plan of Action on Hate Speech*, 2019, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3889290?v=pdf>, (last accessed 9 July 2026).

hate speech as a distinctive harm, the factual question of whether its regulations—be they statutory or extralegal—actually succeed in safeguarding the dignity and participation of targeted groups stands apart from the normative inquiry of whether such protection would be legitimate in principle. Such conundrum remains genuinely contested in the literature¹⁵⁷ and adopting a settled position on it within the current work proves challenging; what can be stated with greater confidence is that the theoretical case for framing hate speech as meriting some protective response—whether through political correctness understood as informal social governance, or through more formal legal mechanisms—rests on a coherent and influential body of argument, even if its concrete efficacy requires separate empirical substantiation that falls partly outside the scope of philosophical investigation alone.

Viewed collectively, these lines of reasoning explain why the prevention of hate speech has become one of the prominent contemporary rationales for the movement. By fostering egalitarian communicative dynamics and disputing modes of utterance capable of reinforcing prejudice, advocates maintain that political correctness contributes to creating societal conditions less conducive to discrimination and hostility¹⁵⁸. It is worth emphasising that the framework outlined here is deliberately narrow. It does not establish that each and every instance of the phenomenon serves to safeguard dignity or facilitate engagement; nor does it imply that the divide between warranted defensive norms and excessive or counterproductive enforcement, scrutinised in the previous chapter¹⁵⁹, dissolves once hate speech specifically is at stake. On the contrary, it suggests that hate speech embodies the paradigmatic case in which the protective function ascribed to political correctness finds its strongest conceptual grounding, precisely because the harm under examination—damage to equal social standing—is clearly and directly addressed by discouraging the discourse that produces it. The feasibility of pursuing the above-mentioned objectives without generating undue constraints upon freedom of expression continues to be the central issue explored throughout the subsequent section of this study.

¹⁵⁷ See M. Lepoutre, “Hate Speech Laws: Expressive Power Is Not the Answer”, in *Legal Theory*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2019, pp. 272–296; K. Gelber, L. McNamara, “The Effects of Civil Hate Speech Laws: Lessons from Australia”, in *Law & Society Review*, Vol. 49, No. 3, 2015, pp. 638–639, 640–649.

¹⁵⁸ See J. Waldron, *The Harm in Hate Speech*, Harvard University Press, 2012, pp. 1–6, 85–89, 105–116; S. Dzenis, F. N. Faria, “Political Correctness: the Twofold Protection of Liberalism”, in *Philosophia*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2020, pp. 95–111.

¹⁵⁹ See Chapter 2, Section 3.

2. Where to Draw the Line: “Cancel Culture”

Having unpacked the safeguarding role that political correctness can plausibly claim in relation to hate speech, attention must now be directed to a practice in which the negative effects of the movement are most visibly and contentiously displayed: “cancel culture”. Although no globally endorsed definition exists, the expression generally refers to the communal practice whereby individuals, institutions, or public figures become subject to widespread collective condemnation, social ostracism, or economic and professional consequences following statements or conduct deemed offensive, discriminatory, or otherwise incompatible with established community conventions. Whereas the regulation discussed in the previous section pertains to the discouragement of discourse that demeans or excludes vulnerable groups, “cancel culture” revolves around systemic dynamics of publicly identifying, denouncing, and withdrawing support from persons or organisations perceived to have violated prevailing normative standards, which frequently derive from, or are justified by reference to, the same equalising commitments underlying political correctness more broadly. In contrast to legal sanctions, the practice typically operates through decentralised mechanisms of public accountability, relying on social media platforms, coordinated campaigns, consumer boycotts, reputational pressure, and institutional responses rather than judicial intervention. For this reason, “cancel culture” occupies a particularly controversial position within debates surrounding freedom of expression, as it raises questions concerning the distinction between legitimate civic criticism and forms of informal censorship¹⁶⁰. Notwithstanding the conceptual demarcation separating the dynamic and political correctness, many commentators regard the latter as one of the principal cultural catalysts that has nurtured its development. The phenomenon encourages increased sensitivity towards disparaging or exclusionary language and seeks to promote greater awareness of the societal implications of communication. Detractors argue, however, that these permissible purposes may, under certain circumstances, evolve into systems of non-statutory norm enforcement in which popular disapproval becomes progressively detached from proportionality or context¹⁶¹. As Michael Thiele observes, contemporary “cancel culture” reflects broader struggles over symbolic power and public

¹⁶⁰ See K. Klonick, “The New Governors: The People, Rules, and Processes Governing Online Speech”, in *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 131, No. 6, 2018, pp. 1599–1670; J. Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, Brookings Institution Press, 2021, pp. 189–231.

¹⁶¹ See G. Lukianoff, J. Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*, Penguin Press, 2018, pp. 195–212; J. Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, Brookings Institution Press, 2021, pp. 189–231.

legitimacy, where concerted reactions steadily determine the boundaries of acceptable utterance¹⁶². Viewed through this analytical lens, political correctness does not directly create such a practice; rather, it may contribute to a discursive environment in which reputational repercussions emerge as an increasingly common countermeasure to alleged transgressions of shifting linguistic and ideological conventions.

Supporters of “cancel culture” invariably reject the phrase itself, preferring to characterise these dynamics as legitimate modes of democratic accountability. They contend that individuals possess the same freedom to reproach speech as others possess to utter it, and that communal condemnation constitutes an exercise of free expression as distinct from a restriction upon it¹⁶³. Within this interpretation, consumer boycotts, institutional criticism, and collective refusals to provide public platforms are conceptualised as ordinary manifestations of civil society responding to conduct deemed inconsistent with shared ethical values. Such an understanding resonates with wider discussions concerning counterspeech, social responsibility, and the capacity of pluralistic communities to regulate civic discourse through voluntary rather than legal instruments¹⁶⁴. Empirical research confirms that the locution defies straightforward categorisation, and this semantic instability is not incidental but constitutive of the societal debate. A large-scale Pew Research Center survey of over ten thousand American adults found the citizenry “deeply divided... over the very meaning of the phrase”, with this divergence noticeably manifesting itself in how participants frame the effects of informal sanctioning: 58% of respondents described the act of calling out others on social media as more likely to hold people accountable, while 38% perceived it as more likely to punish those who do not deserve it¹⁶⁵. A second and complementary poll revealed that the practice’s salience has progressively grown: 61% of US individuals reported having heard “at least a fair amount” about the expression “cancel culture” by 2022, representing a significant

¹⁶² M. Thiele, “Political correctness and Cancel Culture – a question of power!”, in *Journalism Research*, Vol. 4, No. 1, 2021, pp. 53–55.

¹⁶³ See F. Coleman, “The Anatomy of Cancel Culture”, in *Journal of Free Speech Law*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2022, pp. 236–242; A. de Silva, R. M. Simpson, “Law as Counterspeech”, in *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice*, Vol. 26, No. 4, 2023, pp. 493–502.

¹⁶⁴ See F. Coleman, “The Anatomy of Cancel Culture”, in *Journal of Free Speech Law*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 2022, pp. 236–242; E. Diether, S. Yi, L. P. Argyle, E. C. Busby, “The Political Psychology of Cancel Culture: Value Framing or Group Identity?”, in *Political Psychology*, Vol. 77, No. 4, 2024, pp. 1130–1145.

¹⁶⁵ Pew Research Centre, *Americans and ‘Cancel Culture’: Where Some See Calls for Accountability, Others See Censorship, Punishment*, 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/05/19/americans-and-cancel-culture-where-some-see-calls-for-accountability-others-see-censorship-punishment/>, (last accessed 5 July 2026).

increase from 44% in September 2020¹⁶⁶. This trajectory is consistent with the comprehensive argument, examined in the previous chapter¹⁶⁷, that non-statutory societal penalties—once normalised—tend towards escalation as opposed to stabilisation, since growing familiarity with a punitive communal apparatus plausibly lowers the threshold for its invocation rather than elevating it.

The primary factual objection directed against “cancel culture” centers on its propensity to exert a “chilling effect” upon freedom of speech. Unlike criminal prosecutions, which are generally subject to procedural safeguards and judicial review, extralegal systems of public condemnation often operate without clearly defined standards, proportionality requirements, or opportunities for meaningful defence. Jonathan Rauch maintains that institutions dedicated to the production of knowledge depend on norms encouraging disagreement, error correction, and intellectual openness; where reputational repercussions become sufficiently pervasive, actors may refrain from voicing controversial yet lawful opinions driven by the fear of professional or social consequences¹⁶⁸. Similar apprehensions are articulated by Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt, who argue that contemporary cultures of collective shaming, particularly within universities and online spaces, may incentivise self-censorship—the practical mechanism through which the diffusion of political correctness, when weaponised via retributive to the exclusion of corrective societal enforcement, engenders such a “chilling effect” on civic discourse—and reduce the willingness of interlocutors to engage with divisive ideas¹⁶⁹. Consequently, the harm associated with “cancel culture” is not chiefly located in any single act of denunciation, but in its cumulative and anticipatory ramifications: agents modify their speech not because they have personally been “cancelled”, but because they have observed others being “cancelled” and adjust their behaviour pre-emptively to avoid an analogous fate. These criticisms do not necessarily deny the legitimacy of communal reproach itself, but question whether the intensity and permanence of certain forms of concerted censure remain compatible with the ideals of open democratic deliberation. The rapid development of digital communication has substantially amplified such anxieties. Networking architectures facilitate the instantaneous dissemination of information to global audiences, while algorithmic

¹⁶⁶ E. A. Vogels, *A Growing Share of Americans Are Familiar with 'Cancel Culture'*, Pew Research Centre, 2022, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/06/09/a-growing-share-of-americans-are-familiar-with-cancel-culture/>, (last accessed 2 July 2026).

¹⁶⁷ See Chapter 2, Section 3.

¹⁶⁸ See J. Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, Brookings Institution Press, 2021, pp. 189–231.

¹⁶⁹ G. Lukianoff, J. Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*, Penguin Press, 2018, pp. 125–141, 195–212.

recommendation protocols frequently reward emotionally charged or polarising input. As a result, scandals that might hitherto have been confined to a local or ephemeral scale are capable of generating worldwide reputational fallout within a matter of hours. Kate Klonick demonstrates that major technology companies increasingly exercise quasi-regulatory authority over virtual expression through content moderation policies, platform governance, and account sanctioning instruments¹⁷⁰. Although these apparatuses are mainly intended to mitigate harmful material, they also contribute to shaping the operational conditions under which public interchange occurs. At the same time, empirical studies have documented mounting levels of voluntary reticence among users discussing politically sensitive topics on social media, suggesting that foreseen collective reactions may influence interactional conduct even in the absence of formal legal restrictions¹⁷¹. Pragmatic controversies illustrate the complexity of such dynamics. High-profile figures including academics, journalists, entertainers, politicians, and corporate executives have experienced campaigns aimed at securing dismissals, withdrawal of invitations, termination of commercial relationships, or removal from digital platforms following divisive manifest pronouncements. While some cases encompass utterances widely regarded as discriminatory or odious, others concern partisan opinions or historical statements whose communal evaluation continues to be contested. The diversity of these instances reveals that “cancel culture” cannot be understood simply as a conduit for counteracting hate speech; on the contrary, it represents an evolving system of informal societal oversight, the legitimacy of which normally depends upon context, proportionality, and the nature of the assertion involved. A myriad of concrete episodes illuminate the scope and heterogeneity of situations subsumed under the practice and the difficulty of formulating a single normative assessment. Chief within the most debated exemplars in the scholarly literature is that of J.K. Rowling, whose overt interventions on gender identity and transgender rights, which began in 2020, prompted widespread criticism: the writer faced sustained crusades for the suppression of her works and media arenas, calls for boycotts, and the distancing of certain public personages and organisations, whereas simultaneously eliciting an equally vigorous defence grounded in freedom of expression¹⁷². Opponents contended that her views caused harm to transgender people; supporters maintained that

¹⁷⁰ K. Klonick, “The New Governors: The People, Rules, and Processes Governing Online Speech”, in *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 131, No. 6, 2018, pp. 1630–1635.

¹⁷¹ Pew Research Centre, *The Future of Free Speech, Trolls, Anonymity and Fake News Online*, 2017, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2017/03/29/the-future-of-free-speech-trolls-anonymity-and-fake-news-online/>, (last accessed 2 July 2026).

¹⁷² See L. Brooks, “Why is J.K. Rowling speaking out now on sex and gender debate?”, in *The Guardian*, 2020, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/jun/11/why-is-jk-rowling-speaking-out-now-on-sex-and-gender-debate?>, (last accessed 2 July 2026).

she was being penalised for voicing polemical but lawful political opinions¹⁷³. The case is regularly mentioned in the academic discourse exactly because it eludes simple classification: it constituted neither hate speech as legally defined in the majority of jurisdictions nor a straightforwardly exclusionary act, but rather a philosophical dispute about the boundaries of acceptable thought¹⁷⁴. In an analogous vein, comedian Kevin Hart was forced to relinquish his role as host of the 2019 Academy Awards ceremony in the wake of the resurfacing of homophobic tweets from approximately a decade earlier, exemplifying how past pronouncements may acquire renewed significance within shifting social conventions¹⁷⁵. The episode raised pivotal questions about retrospective liability and whether the criteria of a prior era could fairly be applied through contemporary sanctioning apparatuses. Actress Gina Carano likewise lost her association with Lucasfilm subsequent to a series of controversial online utterances, an occurrence frequently cited in analyses regarding the interplay between private enterprise governance, popular pressure, and free expression¹⁷⁶. A fourth and inherently juridically complex instance is that of Colin Kaepernick, whose 2016 decision to kneel during the US national anthem as a demonstration against police brutality triggered a coordinated campaign—notably from institutional actors to the exclusion of merely ordinary citizens—that prematurely terminated his NFL career¹⁷⁷. Last but not least, Kanye West experienced perhaps one of the most financially consequential and extensively chronicled exemplars of present-day ostracism of a multidisciplinary creative whose public persona, statements, and commercial relationships have been repeatedly subject to such dynamics, as numerous corporate partnerships—including those with Adidas, Balenciaga, and Gap—were voided

¹⁷³ See L. J. Miller, “J. K. Rowling’s Anti-Trans Rhetoric: Populist Transantagonism”, in *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, Vol. 110, No. 3, 2024, pp. 479–488; E. A. Magazin, G. Haddock, T. Proulx, “The Face of Left-Wing Dissent: Progressives and Traditional Liberals Generate Divergently Negative and Positive Representations of J. K. Rowling”, in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 2025, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/epub/10.1177/01461672251378189>, (last accessed 9 July 2026).

¹⁷⁴ For an analysis of how such polarised happenings expose the conceptual elasticity of the practice, see E. Diether, S. Yi, L. P. Argyle, E. C. Busby, “The Political Psychology of Cancel Culture: Value Framing or Group Identity?”, in *Political Psychology*, Vol. 77, No. 4, 2024, pp. 1130–1145.

¹⁷⁵ See K. Lyons, “Kevin Hart steps down as Oscars host after three days of controversy”, in *The Guardian*, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/dec/07/kevin-hart-steps-down-as-oscars-host-after-three-days-of-controversy?>, (last accessed 2 July 2026).

¹⁷⁶ See Z. Seemayer, “‘Mandalorian’ actress Gina Carano dropped by Lucasfilm and talent agency after controversial tweets”, in *CBS News*, 2021, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/gina-carano-mandalorian-actress-dropped-by-lucasfilm-talent-agency-in-wake-of-controversial-tweets-2020-02-10/>, (last accessed 2 July 2026).

¹⁷⁷ See M. Payne, “Colin Kaepernick refuses to stand for national anthem to protest police killings”, in *The Washington Post*, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/early-lead/wp/2016/08/27/colin-kaepernick-refuses-to-stand-for-national-anthem-to-protest-police-killings/>, (last accessed 2 July 2026).

on the heels of antisemitic manifest remarks in 2022¹⁷⁸. This case is examined in greater depth in the following section, dedicated to the effects of political correctness on artistic production. Accordingly, several scholars have noted that cancelling has allowed the general population to demand heightened accountability and more rigorous standards for prominent personages, elected officials, and brands, with boycotts such as those of Harvey Weinstein and Bill Cosby reflecting a refusal to persist in tolerating the abuse of minors and women¹⁷⁹. The core theoretical problem resides in the practice's lack of commensurability and due process: unlike statutory responsibility mechanisms, which distinguish between gradations of culpability and severity, cancelling as a social phenomenon commonly does not, collapsing trivial lapses and serious misconduct into the same punitive framework of public denunciation and reputational destruction¹⁸⁰.

It is precisely such a deficiency, combined with the documented escalatory tendency of extralegal retributive norms, that connects “cancel culture” directly to the broader argument of this thesis pertaining to the excesses of political correctness. Where the latter, in its moderate form, endeavours to discourage degrading language in order to safeguard equal standing and participation, “cancel culture” embodies what might be conceptualised as the identical underlying logic pursued past the point of productive calibration: the protective impulse becomes, in its most severe manifestations, indistinguishable from the very expressions of communal hostility and exclusion that political correctness originally sought to dismantle. Essentially, “cancel culture” delineates the practical difficulties of balancing political correctness with free speech in contemporary democratic societies. On the one hand, societal answerability constitutes a fundamental component of civic life, enabling communities to voice collective disapproval of behaviour perceived as detrimental or exclusionary. On the other hand, where informal sanctions turn out to be disproportionate, unpredictable, or ill-equipped to discern between genuine hatred and legitimate disagreement, they risk stifling intellectual pluralism and narrowing the range of ideas overtly articulated in the public

¹⁷⁸ See D. Anguiano, “Chorus of outrage against Kanye West grows as antisemitic incidents rattle LA”, in *The Guardian*, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/oct/24/los-angeles-leaders-condemn-kanye-wests-antisemitic-comments?>, (last accessed 2 July 2026); S. Butler, P. Oltermann, M. Ferrier, “Adidas cuts ties with Kanye West over antisemitic comments”, in *The Guardian*, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/oct/25/adidas-cuts-ties-with-kanye-west-over-antisemitic-comments?>, (last accessed 2 July 2026); for a comprehensive account of the Kanye West case, consult Section 3.1 of this chapter.

¹⁷⁹ Harvey Weinstein, a renowned Hollywood producer, was accused by over eighty women of sexual harassment and assault; he was criminally convicted of rape and sexual assault in New York (2020, retried in 2025) and Los Angeles (2022), with multiple allegations involving aspiring actresses who were minors at the time of the abuse. Comedian Bill Cosby was criminally convicted in 2018 for the aggravated indecent assault of Andrea Constand; although the Pennsylvania Supreme Court overturned his criminal conviction in 2021 on procedural due process grounds, a California civil jury in 2022 subsequently found him liable for the sexual abuse of a 16-year-old minor at the Playboy Mansion in 1975.

¹⁸⁰ S. A. Koh, “Cancel Culture and Criminal Justice”, in *Hastings Law Journal*, Vol. 74, No. 1, 2022, pp. 82–86, 97–105.

sphere. Consequently, the principal challenge is not whether popular dissent should exist, but how deliberative polities may preserve protocols of accountability without permitting them to degrade into systems of social conformity incompatible with the values of open discussion that freedom of expression seeks to protect.

3. The Effects of Political Correctness on Arts and Other Forms of Expression

The influence of political correctness upon artistic and cultural manifestation amounts to one of the eminently contested and tangibly visible dimensions of the wider debate surrounding free speech. Across a spectrum of creative domains—from cinema and television to comedy, literature, and music—the normative pressures associated with the movement have generated responses that range from substantive representational progress to what critics describe as the subordination of expressive liberty to ideological orthodoxy¹⁸¹. In contrast to statutory restrictions, the ramifications of political correctness within the arts generally emerge through non-codified communal norms, market incentives, administrative guidelines, and societal reactions rather than direct governmental intervention. As a result, artists, producers, publishers, and humanistic institutions increasingly operate in an environment wherein creative choices are shaped not only by aesthetic considerations but also by expectations concerning inclusivity, diversity, and civic responsibility. Supporters of this development hold that artistic production has diachronically reflected dominant hegemonic perspectives while marginalising minority narratives, and therefore regard heightened sensitivity towards issues of race, gender, sexuality, disability, and religion as a necessary corrective designed to broaden representation and foster more diverse channels of cultural engagement¹⁸². Detractors, however, contend that these dynamics may engender inhibitions capable of dampening stylistic experimentation whenever creators anticipate significant reputational or commercial consequences for crafting controversial works¹⁸³.

Such tensions are particularly evident throughout the current movie and television industry. In recent years, major studios have developed remakes or new adaptations with greater attention to

¹⁸¹ See R. Hughes, *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America*, Oxford University Press, 1993, pp. 17–26; N. Fairclough, “Political Correctness: The Politics of Culture and Language”, in *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2003, pp. 18–24.

¹⁸² See N. Fairclough, “Political Correctness: The Politics of Culture and Language”, in *Discourse & Society*, Vol. 14, No. 1, 2003, pp. 17–21; S. Dzenis, F. N. Faria, “Political Correctness: the Twofold Protection of Liberalism”, in *Philosophia*, Vol. 48, No. 1, 2020, pp. 95–111.

¹⁸³ See G. Lukianoff, J. Haidt, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*, Penguin Press, 2018, pp. 195–212; J. Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, Brookings Institution Press, 2021, pp. 189–231.

variety and inclusion. Disney's reimaginings and a multitude of projects distributed by Netflix have frequently triggered public discourse with respect to actor selection strategies, the reinterpretation of established characters, and the modification of storylines initially conceived in different civilisational contexts. Whereas advocates perceive these trends as justifiable efforts to ensure pluralistic depiction and to mirror progressively heterogeneous societies, sceptics argue that market-driven anxieties relating to corporate-image risk and online backlash may encourage creative conservatism, discouraging producers from exploring contentious themes or accurately reproducing historically sensitive material¹⁸⁴. The controversies pertaining to Disney's live-action *The Little Mermaid*, the cinematic translation of *Snow White*, and Netflix releases such as *Queen Cleopatra* illustrate how contemporary media products consistently become focal points for wider political and ideological disputes extending well beyond aesthetic merit¹⁸⁵. This debate encapsulates a systemic friction within the film sector: between the legitimate goal of expanding who is portrayed in mainstream culture and the apprehension that politically correct pressures on casting and substance may prioritise symbolic visibility over diegetic and authorial integrity, yielding what critics sometimes describe as a tokenistic approach to inclusivity which satisfies quantitative metrics while remaining artistically and conceptually superficial¹⁸⁶.

Comparable misgivings arise throughout the domain of comedy, since such a field has been traditionally characterised by transgression, provocation, satire, and the deliberate testing of prevailing norms and social boundaries. One of the most chronicled recent episodes is that of Dave Chappelle, whose 2021 Netflix special *The Closer*—which contains jokes about transgender identity—generated a coordinated campaign by the company's workforce and trans activists requesting its removal, placing the streaming giant's executives in the position of having to balance the competing imperatives of expressive liberty, employee concerns, and platform governance. Significantly, Netflix chose not to withdraw the special, framing its decision as a defence of artistic freedom even on controversial topics—a stance that morphed into a contested political pronouncement. The case exemplifies a dynamic that is now well-documented in the humour

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁵ See A. Hawkins, "Disney's Little Mermaid Flops in China Amid Racist Backlash Over Casting", in *The Guardian*, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/jun/09/disney-little-mermaid-flops-china-racist-backlash-casting?>, (last accessed 8 July 2026); M. L. Restrepo, "Another Disney princess, another online outrage. This time it's about 'Snow White'", in *NPR*, 2023, <https://www.npr.org/2023/08/18/1194702228/rachel-zegler-snow-white-disney-remake?>, (last accessed 8 July 2026); H. Sherwood, "Cleopatra was light-skinned, Egypt tells Netflix in row over drama", in *The Guardian*, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2023/apr/28/cleopatra-was-light-skinned-egypt-tells-netflix-in-row-over-drama>, (last accessed 8 July 2026).

¹⁸⁶ M. H. Azman, N. F. A. Jabar, "Diversity as Discourse: A Critical Race Theory-Informed Analysis of Tokenism in Media Debates on Inclusive Casting", in *ISRG Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences*, Vol. 4, No.1, 2026, pp. 370–377.

industry: satirists report escalating pre-emptive censorship propelled not by formal legal coercion but by the anticipation of reputational consequences¹⁸⁷. This self-regulatory mechanism—the internalisation of projected communal reactions as a constraint on creative endeavour—is, as Jack Black maintains in his psychoanalytic exploration of comedy and political correctness, the precise point at which the paradigm begins to shape instead of merely responding to aesthetic production¹⁸⁸. Manifold humourists have asserted that evolving standards associated with the latter phenomenon have profoundly altered both societal expectations and professional incentives. Jerry Seinfeld has consistently affirmed that many comedians increasingly avoid performing on university campuses because their audiences have grown less tolerant of provocative humour, while Chris Rock, Ricky Gervais and Dave Chappelle himself have repeatedly championed the idea that the possibility of causing offence is inherent to the craft and that controversial material should generally be evaluated through popular scrutiny and dialectic rather than through demands for its suppression¹⁸⁹. Although such statements are not themselves empirical proof that political correctness has diminished artistic freedom, they delineate a widespread perception within the vocation that heightened public surveillance and the rapid dissemination of criticism through social media have transformed the practical conditions under which comedy is articulated and received.

Music has likewise been affected, albeit via modalities distinct from those manifesting in cinema or satire. Instead of modifying the expressive content itself, political correctness predominantly influences the communal reception of musicians, their marketing partnerships, and the willingness of humanistic institutions to align with highly sensitive figures. Civil-society mobilisations directed against artists accused of discriminatory, sexist, racist, or otherwise offensive conduct progressively exemplify that intellectual output is appraised not only according to aesthetic

¹⁸⁷ See S. Humphries, H. Bruinius, “Pulling punchlines: Comedy can be offensive. But should it be reined in?”, in *The Christian Science Monitor*, 2021, <https://www.csmonitor.com/Arts-Culture/2021/1129/Pulling-punchlines-Comedy-can-be-offensive.-But-should-it-be-reined-in>, (last accessed 8 July 2026).

¹⁸⁸ See J. Black, *Race, Racism and Political Correctness in Comedy: A Psychoanalytic Exploration*, Routledge, 2021, pp. 30–62.

¹⁸⁹ See A. Mikelberg, “Jerry Seinfeld says political correctness is hurting comedy”, in *CBS News*, 2015, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/jerry-seinfeld-says-political-correctness-is-hurting-comedy/>, (last accessed 8 July 2026); M. S. Sweeney, M. Frassica, “Why comedians are refusing to put on shows on college campuses”, in *The World*, 2015, <https://theworld.org/stories/2015/06/19/college-kids-arent-laughing-why-comedians-are-refusing-shows-campus>, (last accessed 8 July 2026); L. Bradley, “Ricky Gervais Will Never Back Down”, in *Vanity Fair*, 2019, <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2019/03/ricky-gervais-interview-after-life-netflix>, (last accessed 8 July 2026); A. Gregory, “Chris Rock Says Cancel Culture Is Making Comedy ‘Unfunny’”, in *Exclaim!*, 2021, <https://exclaim.ca/comedy/article/chris-rock-says-cancel-culture-is-making-comedy-unfunny>, (last accessed 8 July 2026); A. R. Chow, “Breaking Down the Controversy Around Dave Chappelle’s Netflix Special *The Closer*”, in *Time*, 2021, <https://time.com/6105951/dave-chappelle-netflix-controversy/>, (last accessed 8 July 2026).

criteria but also in light of broader ethical prescriptions¹⁹⁰. Similar patterns can also be observed in literature, visual arts, theatre, and museum exhibitions, where disputes pertaining to historical representation, cultural appropriation, and contentious symbolism have prompted both organisational reconsideration and societal discord¹⁹¹. Viewed collectively, these developments demonstrate that political correctness increasingly operates not as a formal system of artistic censorship but as a pervasive normative framework capable of shaping creative production through consumer expectations, reputational incentives, and market responses. Whether such shifts ultimately enrich expressive diversity or conversely constrain authorial autonomy remains deeply contested; nevertheless, they illustrate how current intellectual expression has become inseparable from wider debates concerning language, identity, and the boundaries of acceptable civic discourse.

3.1 Genius and Madness: the Kanye West Case

Few present-day artists embody the complex and sometimes devastating relationship between artistic freedom, political correctness, and informal mechanisms of public accountability more vividly than Kanye Omari West, legally known as Ye—whose career constitutes what might be an unparalleled and extensively documented case study of a personage simultaneously elevated and consumed by these dynamics. Widely acknowledged as one of the most innovative and influential musicians of the twenty-first century, West has profoundly steered the evolution of hip-hop; with 24 Grammy Awards across 76 nominations and six albums featured in *Rolling Stone*'s updated list of “The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time”, his influence on contemporary music is structural rather than merely commercial¹⁹². Beginning as a producer for Roc-A-Fella Records, Ye redefined hip-hop's sonic and conceptual possibilities through a succession of landmark albums: *The College Dropout* (2004), which blended gospel, humor, and political awareness; *Late Registration* (2005); *Graduation* (2007); *808s & Heartbreak* (2008), characterised by a pioneering use of Auto-Tune that reshaped a generation of artists, including Drake and Kid Cudi; *My Beautiful Dark Twisted Fantasy*

¹⁹⁰ See K. Klonick, “The New Governors: The People, Rules, and Processes Governing Online Speech”, in *Harvard Law Review*, Vol. 131, No. 6, 2018, pp. 1599–1670; E. Kinsella, R. Corbett, ““What Is Considered Evil?” How US Museum Leaders Are Grappling With the Fallout of Warren Kanders's Controversial Resignation From the Whitney”, in *Artnet News*, 2019, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/archives/museum-funding-post-kanders-1620715>, (last accessed 8 July 2026).

¹⁹¹ See B. Tøndborg, “The Dangerous Museum: Participatory Practices and Controversy in Museums Today”, in *Nordisk Museologi*, No. 2, 2013, pp. 3–16; A. Gazi, “Exhibition Ethics—An Overview of Major Issues”, in *Journal of Conservation and Museum Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2014, <https://jcms-journal.com/articles/10.5334/jcms.1021213>, (last accessed 8 July 2026).

¹⁹² “The 500 Greatest Albums of All Time”, in *Rolling Stone*, 2023, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-lists/best-albums-of-all-time-1062063/arcade-fire-funeral-1062733/>, (last accessed 8 July 2026).

(2010), universally regarded as a masterpiece of modern recording; *Yeezus* (2013); and *The Life of Pablo* (2016). These creations expanded the artistic and aesthetic frontiers of rap by incorporating soul, electronics, orchestral arrangements, and highly personal lyrical themes¹⁹³. His impact transcends the musical sphere, encompassing fashion, the visual landscape, and prevailing design by means of ventures such as the Yeezy brand, cementing his iconic status as a culturally paramount figure of the current era. The “Genius” in this section’s title is, therefore, not rhetorical.

At the same time, the “madness” is equally thoroughly chronicled. West’s career has been punctuated by a sequence of controversies of escalating severity. Initial incidents— inflammatory remarks during Hurricane Katrina relief coverage in 2005 and the interruption of Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards¹⁹⁴—evidenced his tendency to blur the distinction between artistic provocation and personal disruptive behaviour, yet they remained within the range of recoverable reputational damage and did not materially impair his professional standing. The decisive turning point occurred in 2022, when Ye wore a “White Lives Matter” T-shirt at Paris Fashion Week and published antisemitic pronouncements on social media. In the aftermath of these remarks, Adidas terminated the Yeezy partnership, Balenciaga ended its collaboration with the artist, Gap withdrew all Yeezy merchandise and shut down the website YeezyGap.com and both Twitter and Instagram suspended his accounts¹⁹⁵. Such developments illustrate how image-related consequences generated through popular friction may rapidly translate into substantial economic and vocational sanctions, even in the absence of judicial intervention. The backlash intensified progressively when West appeared on the programme *Infowars* on 1st December 2022, where he made a series of statements voicing admiration for Adolf Hitler and denying that all aspects of Nazism should be unequivocally repudiated. These assertions provoked near-global condemnation and further reinforced the financial and institutional repercussions that had already followed his

¹⁹³ See J. Caramanica, “The Education of Kanye West”, in *The New York Times*, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/08/26/arts/music/26cara.html>, (last accessed 8 July 2026); J. Caramanica, “Kanye West’s ‘Donda’ Era, on a Chaotic Stage”, in *The New York Times*, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/31/arts/music/kanye-west-donda.html>, (last accessed 8 July 2026).

¹⁹⁴ The 2005 incident unfolded during a live NBC telethon for Hurricane Katrina relief, wherein West veered off-script, famously declaring that “George Bush doesn’t care about Black people”; subsequently, the 2009 episode transpired at the MTV Video Music Awards, when he interrupted Taylor Swift’s acceptance speech for Best Female Video, taking the microphone on stage to assert that Beyoncé possessed “one of the best videos of all time”.

¹⁹⁵ See D. Anguiano, “Chorus of outrage against Kanye West grows as antisemitic incidents rattle LA”, in *The Guardian*, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/oct/24/los-angeles-leaders-condemn-kanye-wests-antisemitic-comments?>, (last accessed 2 July 2026); S. Butler, P. Oltermann, M. Ferrier, “Adidas cuts ties with Kanye West over antisemitic comments”, in *The Guardian*, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2022/oct/25/adidas-cuts-ties-with-kanye-west-over-antisemitic-comments?>, (last accessed 2 July 2026).

prior antisemitic comments¹⁹⁶. Although Ye publicly apologised to the Jewish community in late 2023, affirming that he regretted the pain caused by his previous utterances and asking for forgiveness¹⁹⁷, the tension did not halt there. In early 2025, during what West later described as a four-month manic episode, he declared himself a Nazi on social media, sold swastika-printed T-shirts on Yeezy.com, and released a song named “Heil Hitler” in May, whose title and lyrical content were overwhelmingly criticised as perpetuating Nazi imagery and antisemitic symbolism, leading several digital platforms and distributors to remove the track from circulation¹⁹⁸. In January 2026, West placed a full-page advertisement in *The Wall Street Journal* addressed “To Those I’ve Hurt”, proclaiming: “I am not a Nazi or an antisemite. I love Jewish people”. The rapper attributed his conduct to his bipolar disorder and a hitherto undiagnosed frontal lobe brain injury¹⁹⁹. The acknowledgment of wrongdoing, widely regarded as belated and insufficient, has not restored his standing and the fallout has proved durable rather than temporary. The United Kingdom withheld a visa from Ye, preventing him from performing at the Wireless Festival in London and entailing the cancellation of the entire event, while France effectively proscribed a planned concert in Marseille. West was also announced as headliner for the Hellwatt Festival at the RCF Arena in Reggio Emilia, Italy, scheduled for 18th July 2026. The Jewish Community of Modena and Reggio Emilia officially requested the axing of the musical engagement, and political pressure mounted from the municipal level to the central government. On 29th May 2026, the Prefect of Reggio Emilia issued a formal ban on the shows of Kanye West and his friend and colleague Travis Scott, citing security and public order concerns, whereupon the whole festival was annulled²⁰⁰. To dismiss such a

¹⁹⁶ See C. Holub, “Kanye West says ‘I like Hitler’, defends Nazis in Alex Jones interview”, in *Entertainment Weekly*, 2022, <https://ew.com/music/kanye-west-declares-i-like-hitler-alex-jones-interview/>, (last accessed 8 July 2026).

¹⁹⁷ See K. Singh, D. Williams, “Rapper Ye, the former Kanye West, apologizes in Hebrew for anti-Jewish remarks”, in *Reuters*, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/rapper-kanye-west-apologizes-jewish-community-antisemitic-remarks-2023-12-26/>, (last accessed 8 July 2026).

¹⁹⁸ See A. Brown, “Ye claims streamers banned his new single ‘Heil Hitler’”, in *Los Angeles Times*, 2025, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/music/story/2025-05-09/ye-claims-streamers-banned-his-new-single-heil-hitler>, (last accessed 9 July 2026); B. Goggin, “Ye song glorifying Hitler gets millions of views on X while other platforms struggle to remove it”, in *NBC News*, 2025, <https://www.nbcnews.com/tech/tech-news/ye-song-glorifying-hitler-gets-millions-views-x-platforms-struggle-rem-rcna205905>, (last accessed 9 July 2026).

¹⁹⁹ L. Snapes, “Kanye West takes out full-page ad apologising for antisemitic behaviour and denying he is a Nazi”, in *The Guardian*, 2026, <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2026/jan/26/kanye-west-takes-out-full-page-ad-apologising-for-antisemitic-behaviour-and-denying-he-is-a-nazi-ye>, (last accessed 9 July 2026); E. Beck., “Kanye West apologizes for antisemitism, links behavior to 2002 brain injury”, in *The Washington Post*, 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/style/2026/01/26/kanye-west-ye-antisemitism-apology/>, (last accessed 9 July 2026).

²⁰⁰ F. Pinto, “Kanye West and Travis Scott concerts in Italy cancelled”, in *Euronews*, 2026, <https://www.euronews.com/culture/2026/05/30/kanye-west-and-travis-scott-concerts-in-italy-cancelled>, (last accessed 9 July 2026); “Kanye West e Travis Scott, la Prefettura vieta i concerti alla RCF Arena”, in *Rolling Stone Italia*, 2026, <https://www.rollingstone.it/musica/news-musica/kanye-west-e-travis-scott-la-prefettura-vieta-i-concerti-alla-rcf-arena/1029980/>, (last accessed 9 July 2026).

justification as ridiculous would be an understatement, considering that since its announcement, the scale of the undertaking was fully foreseeable and the venue had been specifically engineered to accommodate more than one hundred thousand attendees. This measure sets an extraordinary and highly unusual precedent, given both the magnitude of the gathering and the concomitant geopolitical and ideological motivations involved, which ignited an intense domestic debate surrounding freedom of speech. Crucially, it constitutes the first instance in Italy where an internationally renowned artist's performance has been barred on the aforementioned grounds, thereby revealing an unparalleled degree of institutional hostility directed towards an individual creator, that amounts to a totalitarian prior restraint—the most constitutionally sensitive form of verbal restriction, precisely because it suppresses expression before it occurs instead of responding to it afterwards. This is just another example of how organisers, local authorities, sponsors, and commercial stakeholders increasingly assess artistic outputs not solely according to their cultural significance but additionally in light of overarching ethical, reputational, and societal considerations.

The Kanye West case, therefore, encapsulates a multitude of the frictions explored throughout this thesis. His antisemitic statements undoubtedly exceeded the boundaries of permissible civic discourse and attracted criticism that many observers deemed justified—entirely consistent with the accountability apparatus examined in Section 2 of this chapter. Yet the affair simultaneously demonstrates how political correctness, together with broader dynamics commonly associated with “cancel culture”, may operate through decentralised mechanisms of communal pressure that extend far beyond codified legal regulation. As opposed to relying upon courts or statutory prohibitions, these processes unfold via public campaigns, corporate decisions, consumer reactions, and prestige-based sanctions capable of producing long-lasting professional consequences. Whether such informal channels represent a legitimate actuation of collective responsibility or instead risk creating manifestations of private censorship is a question that the tools developed across this dissertation—Waldron's dignitarian framework, Gutmann and Thompson's deliberative ideal, Mill's warning against the tyranny enforced through social conformity—can contextualise but not definitively resolve.

4. Conclusions

The inquiry conducted throughout this monograph has sought to scrutinise whether the current interactions of political correctness and freedom of expression continue to be compatible with the

balance established by the transnational normative architecture governing human rights, or whether they evince the need for a renewed equilibrium between the protection of dignity and the preservation of expressive liberty. The analysis has shown that while the instruments examined in this research—most notably the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the European Convention on Human Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, and the American Convention on Human Rights²⁰¹—already provide a sophisticated prescriptive structure designed to reconcile these competing interests, the practical modalities through which political correctness progressively manifests in latter-day societies frequently surpass, and in some instances subvert, the perimeters those regimes themselves delineate. “Cancel culture”, informal reputational destruction, coordinated campaigns of professional and social exclusion, and, as the Kanye West case illustrates with rare empirical clarity, the administrative prohibition of artistic performances by public authorities responding to partisan pressure, are not phenomena that existing international legal frameworks were conceived to authorise or accommodate. They occupy an evaluative space that is, by definition, extrajudicial: operating beneath the threshold of statutory regulation yet engendering ramifications—loss of livelihood, societal punishments, deplatforming—whose severity would require substantial due process safeguards if imposed by a court of justice. Such mechanisms lack the proportionality, procedural fairness, and contextual differentiation that any legitimate system of accountability should possess. Although many of the expressions that trigger the aforementioned reactions are contentious, exclusionary, or morally reprehensible, the validity of the speaker’s ideas should remain conceptually distinct from the legitimacy of the channels employed to suppress them.

Nevertheless, this observation does not lead to the conclusion that political correctness is, as such, incompatible with free speech. As the present disquisition has demonstrated, a multitude of the doctrine’s underlying objectives—promoting respect, fostering an egalitarian lexicon, challenging discriminatory stereotypes, and protecting vulnerable subjects from forms of symbolic ostracism—are closely aligned with the broader aspirations of contemporary transnational human rights law. The movement has undoubtedly contributed to greater widespread awareness of the communal consequences of language and has encouraged institutions, corporations, and individuals alike to reflect more meticulously upon the impact of their communicative practices. To that extent, political correctness has frequently complemented, rather than contradicted, the values underpinning the preservation of fundamental liberties. The preceding assessment has been careful

²⁰¹ See Chapter 1, Sections 2.1–2.5.

to distinguish between the paradigm in its moderate, norm-setting guise—which can plausibly be understood as a precondition for a fully inclusive and genuinely participatory public debate—and in its inherently coercive, punitive manifestations, which yield the self-censorship, backlash, and discursive narrowing previously chronicled.

It is, in the writer's view, precisely at this point that the existing balance becomes increasingly fragile. Liberal democracies should certainly continue to oppose racism, antisemitism, sexism, homophobia, and other permutations of intolerance, but they should do so without allowing informal apparatuses of popular condemnation to evolve into substitutes for statutory adjudication. A community committed to freedom of expression must inevitably tolerate discourse that many citizens regard as offensive or deeply objectionable, provided that it does not exceed the limits prescribed by law. Otherwise, the boundaries of permissible communication risk being determined not by democratically enacted legal standards or independent judicial scrutiny, but by fluctuating collective sentiment, private corporate policies, or the dynamics of online mobilisation. Such developments may generate uncertainty, incentivise voluntary silencing, and, in the final analysis, weaken the robust "marketplace of ideas" upon which constitutional societies hinge, echoing concerns long articulated by John Stuart Mill and, more recently, by Jonathan Rauch²⁰². Concerts' bans, the permanent commercial destruction of personages for statements subsequently retracted, the documented "chilling effect" on academic and artistic creativity: these are not the outcomes of a well-calibrated system. They are the results of a regime in which the protective logic of political correctness has been permitted to operate in the absence of the constraints that any serious dedication to uninhibited expression demands. Ultimately, the conclusion this thesis reaches is that the principal conundrum does not lie in rejecting the phenomenon altogether, but in restoring an appropriate equilibrium amidst its legitimate tenets and the commensurately essential safeguard of freedom of speech. The paradigm unquestionably retains an important role in encouraging respectful public utterance and advancing equal dignity. However, where its decentralised modalities produce sanctions that substantially transgress those contemplated by the statutory architecture or stifle the lawful dissemination of ideas through fear of disproportionate social consequences, the harmony established by international human rights instruments is being undermined. A recalibrated balance is, therefore, in the standpoint posited here, necessary. The future relationship between political correctness and liberty of expression should be guided by a renewed commitment to proportionality, legal certainty, and democratic diversity. Solely by

²⁰² See J. S. Mill, *On Liberty*, Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 1–99; J. Rauch, *The Constitution of Knowledge: A Defense of Truth*, Brookings Institution Press, 2021, pp. 189–231.

preserving such a symmetry can pluralistic communities effectively shield both individual status and the verbal prerogative on which open debate depends. Freedom of speech, including discourse that is uncomfortable, provocative, or profoundly contested, remains a foundational value of liberal constitutional order that extrajudicial mechanisms of informal censorship are not entitled to override.

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