

EC 1370, February 2, 2010: *Lecture Note on Self-Censorship*

Some of the basic insights/conclusions from Loury's *Self-Censorship* essay are as follows:

1. *Ad hominem* inference vitally important defensive tactic in the forum; knowing "where the speaker stands" helps to evaluate an opinion or factual assertion in the debate.
2. Suspicious speech can "signal" deviance because, once punishing heretics is a well-established practice, those risking ostracism by speaking recklessly are those who place so little value on sharing our community that they must be presumed not to share our dearest common values. Three examples: (Jenninger, McCarthy, Anti-Apartheid)
3. The effective examination of fundamental moral questions can be impeded by the superficial morality of expressive conventions: That is, people may opt for mouthing right-sounding but empty words rather than take the risk of substantive moral analysis.
4. This is deeply ironic, for the desire to police a speaker's morals then leads to a sanitized public discourse that precludes the honest discussion from which genuine moral understanding might arise. One consequence of this is that:
5. Bad decisions may be carried out, though many recognize the error. A certain course of action is imbued with a symbolic meaning-in-effect, quite apart from the real-world consequences of its pursuit. Expression of doubt about the wisdom of this course of action is suppressed because dissenters want not to be labeled as deviant from some communal norm. As a result, the policy is pursued willy-nilly, and on a broad scale, with perhaps benign but perhaps disastrous consequences.
6. A generic problem with conventions of signaling values is the ease with which they can be abused by partisan opportunists. Candid argument exposes one to risk of being "smeared" by the opposition, since pointed remarks on a sensitive topic lend themselves to caricature and distortion. [Consider phenomenon of the political "gaffe".]
7. Futility of Protest: Conventions of tacit restraint in public expression are made more durable by the fact that they do not themselves easily become objects of criticism, since it is often the "truly deviant" who have the greatest interest in criticizing them.
8. Strategic imprecision/calculated ambiguity have a natural rationale
  - a. coded emblems of belief
  - b. plausible deniability
9. Multiple audience situations create special problems
  - a. standing/natural cover (Black prof. can say things a white one can't?)
  - b. context specific meanings (mixed company) and the "gaffe"
  - c. Insiders vs. outsiders: sometimes insiders are the ones most strongly censored
  - d. *True* (Albert Hirschman-esque) loyalty vs. *blind* loyalty
  - e. M. Walzer on value and tenuous circumstance of the "connected" social critic
10. Forbidden Facts
  - a. Implications for knowledge construction (eg., Murray and Herrnstein's natural cover from liberal criticism in many circles due to the excesses of prior liberal self-censorship; also, note how "political correctness" operates on both left and right)
  - b. General reluctance to consider "constitutional" factors in explaining human differences (note reaction to Murray and Herrnstein's *The Bell Curve*)
  - c. Danger to public rationality if very fact of inquiry becomes a signal of one's values
11. A Role for "heroism"?
  - a. "Transcending world of existences" as only solution?
  - b. Are we ultimately dependent upon this kind of thing? (I.e., are there institutional solutions)