

Oh drat! (Or something like that)

By Andrew Robinson

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I've certainly stirred up a hornet's nest here! At the expense of testing everyone's patience, I feel I should reply to some of the critics of my note (*see previous Voices commentary, Down With The Thought Police*). Firstly, my point was to defend someone else's method of advocating his views, not to insist that all of us have to go around swearing all the time... Similarly, I would stand up for a right to go naked, but I choose not to exercise such a right, for reasons which have to do as much with cold winds and trapped extremities as with social norms... This is why I phrased my defence of swearing in a (mostly) curse-free language. My point is not to pick a fight about this as a central issue of political action, but simply to suggest that Naspir should resist pressures to enforce such norms within a community self-defined as critical/radical.

Secondly, my argument may or may not extend to other examples – one gets quickly into thorny territory regarding the exact borderlines between harm and offence over issues such as hygiene, and one should also remember that different social norms often have different historical origins. More crucial to the argument, however, is the fact that, while someone can express the same belief/opinion without being naked, picking their nose, etc., the use of different words can change the meaning of what is said.

I am forever finding myself in the situation of being criticised, not for swearing, but for using words deemed inappropriate for other reasons – for instance, that an article sent to an academic journal specialising in politics is “too political”, or that I shouldn't refer to “bosses” or to ways of life being “smashed”, etc. – in these cases I feel the political significance of what I say would be very much undermined if I were to conform to dominant norms. On one occasion I was also accused of anti-Semitism for putting up a factual poster about the Israeli wall. And a student union socialist society to which I belonged was threatened with closure because someone else (apparently a non-member) had put a poster containing a swear-word on the notice-board. I could point to a number of instances where potential subversives begin by moderating their language and end by moderating their entire way of thinking (Brazil's Lula perhaps?). This isn't just about

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Stirnerian ownness, it's part of real practices of social control.

I'll conclude with an example, taken from SchNews: police spent an entire day tailing a pair of youths, in the hope that they would commit a criminal offence. They didn't. Finally, using eavesdropping equipment, they overheard one of the youths use an "F" word to the other – whereupon the youths were leapt upon by a vanload of cops and arrested for using language likely to cause offence. Offence to whom? To the cops who were eavesdropping... Hardly separable from all the other aspects of police terror in the inner cities.

Andrew Robinson is a student of politics, currently completing his PhD at Nottingham University in England.