



Episode 677: Our Politically Correct Totalitarians

Guest: Keith Preston

WOODS: I just told people about your book, gave them the full title. Let's start off by justifying your use of the very harsh word "totalitarian." Are we not risking downplaying what life must have been like in Soviet Russia or Nazi Germany when we talk about the inconveniences of political correctness as being totalitarian?

PRESTON: Well, we have to understand a number of things when we talk about that question, and we have to understand that the term "totalitarianism" can mean several different things. There is such a thing as "soft totalitarianism" and such a thing as "hard totalitarianism." Now, currently what we have in the Western world is a form of soft totalitarianism. It's not hard totalitarianism of the type we would experience somewhere like North Korea or Stalinist Russia or Nazi Germany, but we do have a system where there is an effort to control every aspect of thought and speech and subordinate the entire character of the society to an ideology. Now, it's true that that hasn't yet gotten to the point where we're sending people to labor camps and having firing squad executions and that kind of thing for political dissent, but we do see a paradigm emerging where there's an effort by the power elite and by institutions to subordinate every area of life to a particular ideological paradigm, and that is what I mean by totalitarianism.

WOODS: All right, let's – I want to just go through a number of your chapters and then strongly recommend that people read it. Now, you are editor in chief of the website Attack the System. Is that where it's easy for people to – or I'm going to have the link to get the book at TomWoods.com/677, but how are you promoting the book?

PRESTON: The best way to get the book is either to order it from Amazon.com, or you can go to the website of the publisher, which is Black House Publishing.

WOODS: Oh, no, we won't do that. That's not going to happen. I just wanted to know if you had a big promo on your site or, you know, splashed all over Attack the System or not.

PRESTON: There's a web page, there's an icon on the homepage of the website that you can actually click on, and it has a portrait of the book being very prominently displayed, and you can click on that and order it from there. That'll take you to the information you need to order the book.

WOODS: Okay, good. Now, let's jump ahead a little bit, because I want to talk about Herbert Marcuse. I want you to tell us who he was. We have mentioned him one other time on the show. But I want to talk specifically, regardless of his other merits or demerits, I want to talk specifically about his essay "Repressive Tolerance," because it has an eerie ring to it these days.

PRESTON: Yeah, "Repressive Tolerance" was an essay that Herbert Marcuse wrote in the mid 1960s, and he was a German immigrant; he was from Germany, who migrated to the United States, and back in the 1950s and 1960s he taught at a number of prominent academic institutions in the United States. And his essay "Repressive Tolerance" outlines this idea that in order to have true tolerance you have to have repression, because you can't really have tolerance if points of view that are considered to be intolerant are allowed to be heard or in beliefs and practices that are considered to be intolerant are allowed to be engaged in. So in order to have tolerance you actually have to have a great deal of control over what people can and can't do, because otherwise someone might do something intolerant.

Now, if you go and read that essay "Repressive Tolerance" by Herbert Marcuse — and it's available online and in different places — you see very specifically that what he is calling for is actual suppression of free speech, freedom of association, all of the traditional classically Western liberal rights that took centuries to achieve and centuries of struggle to achieve some of these things. He's advocating restricting these in the name of promoting tolerance, and as a manifestation of how that works, we see it today with things like hate speech laws, where you can be at some American institutions, you can be subject to economic sanctions or fired from your job or whatever for crossing the line of what is considered politically correct speech or politically incorrect speech.

In some countries now they have hate speech laws where you can actually be arrested for expressing politically incorrect views. For example, in some European countries, you have situations where Christian or even Islamic clerics have been arrested for expressing, say, a negative view of homosexuality or something of that nature. And that kind of thinking is becoming increasingly pervasive in Western institutions, both in the United States and in other Western liberal democratic nations. There was actually an interesting article about that in *The Economist*, the London *Economist* just a few days ago, about how free speech is in decline all around the world, and in the West, the attacks on free speech are mostly being done in the name of promoting equality. We can't say bad words about minorities, women, gays, the immigrants, the transgendered, anyone that's considered to have been discriminated against or disadvantaged in some way.

WOODS: Yeah.

PRESTON: And that's repressive tolerance; that's what repressive tolerance is.

WOODS: Let me read a passage actually from your book. This is — I want to read Marcuse himself first. He says, "The whole post-fascist period is one of clear and

present danger. Consequently, true pacification requires the withdrawal of tolerance before the deed, at the stage of communication in word, print, and picture. Such extreme suspension of the right of free speech and free assembly is indeed justified only if the whole of society is in extreme danger. I maintain that our society is in such an emergency situation, and that it has become the normal state of affairs."

Now, let me just say it's interesting that, given that the vast majority of Americans did not believe their society was in that situation, it's interesting that he takes it upon himself to tell them that they're in a danger they themselves don't perceive. Then you go on to comment, as you just said:

"Here Marcuse is clearly stating that he is not simply advocating 'intolerance' of non-leftist opinion in the sense of offering criticism, rebuttal, counterargument, or even shaming, shunning, or ostracism. What he is calling for is the full fledged state repression of non-leftist opinion or expression." And pardon me for continuing, but this is just such a juicy portion. This is still you talking. "Nor is this repression to be limited to right-wing movements with an explicitly authoritarian agenda that aims to subvert the liberal society."

And then you mention his postscript in 1968 to this 1965 essay. He says — and then I'll just let you go on, but I just want people to hear this. "Given this situation" — now this is Marcuse — "I suggested in 'Repressive Tolerance' the practice of discriminating tolerance in an inverse direction, as a means of shifting the balance between Right and Left by restraining the liberty of the Right, thus counteracting the pervasive inequality of freedom (unequal opportunity of access to the means of democratic persuasion) and strengthening the oppressed against the oppressors." — I guess it should be "oppressors." — "Tolerance would be restricted with respect to movements of a demonstrably aggressive or destructive character (destructive of the prospects for peace, justice, and freedom for all). Such discrimination would also be applied to movements opposing the extension of social legislation to the poor, weak, disabled. As against the virulent denunciations that such a policy would do away with the sacred liberalistic principle of equality for 'the other side', I maintain that there are issues where either there is no 'other side' in any more than a formalistic sense, or where 'the other side' is demonstrably 'regressive' and impedes possible improvement of the human condition. To tolerate propaganda for inhumanity vitiates the goals not only of liberalism but of every progressive political philosophy."

There is so much to say about that. Of course the very idea that the goal — it's "the ends justify the means." Our goals are noble, so if that means suppressing people's rights, well then, doggone it, that's what we've got to do. What other thoughts do you have about this passage?

PRESTON: Well, the important thing to consider about this is that all of the things that Marcuse is advocating in those passages are now being put into practice in institutions where the hard Left has achieved positions of power and influence. We see that most succinctly in the academic world. Whenever we see situations where you have a speaker, say, on a university campus who has less than PC views about this, that, or

the other thing, and you see students rioting in protest of the presence of this particular speaker or throwing objects and things of that nature, or we see universities or other institutions canceling presentations by particular speakers on the grounds that they are offensive.

As an illustration, I saw an example the other day where at some particular university in California, it was declared to be heresy to refer to the United States as a "land of opportunity" on the grounds that, well, people who fail in the United States might not think so, or someone that can't make it entirely on their own merits might be offended by that. And this is how petty and extreme this kind of thinking gets. But if you interact with the people who are zealous promoters of this philosophy, you see that they are 100% dead serious about this.

Primarily we see this kind of thing going on the university campuses in the United States. In Europe it's a little more serious, because these kinds of things are actually working their way into the state, and they're actually being legislated, and the power of the law is being put behind them. I've come across cases like the police in England gathering data about racist incidents on playgrounds among toddlers, or 11-year-olds actually being put in handcuffs because they referred to a Pakistani student by a derogatory ethnic slur or something of that nature.

So essentially what that is is precisely what Marcuse was advocating, or at least the implication of what he says in this passage is, is that non-leftist, non-progressive, inegalitarian ideas, thoughts, speech, etc., should essentially be criminalized and banned from society entirely. This is precisely the kind of system they had in the old Eastern European and Soviet systems. If you go back and look at the actual constitutions of some of the Eastern European Marxist-Leninist regimes, like, say, Nicolae Ceaușescu's Romania or Enver Hoxha's Albania, what you see is in their constitutions they would say, well, of course all citizens have the right of free speech and things like that, except – and they'll list all of these exceptions: except for speech of a racist, nationalist, fascist, capitalist, religious, xenophobic, whatever variety. In other words, anything that's not communist. So you have the right to agree with the regime, and that's about it.

And that is precisely the implication of what is being done in the West now, in the Western liberal democratic countries with this political correctness or whatever we want to call it. It's an effort to essentially gear all of society's institutions and all of private life towards conformity to this particular ideology, and the ideology says that nothing can ever get in the way of social justice and social equality and these kinds of things. The implicit assumption is that the ultimate human evil is to ever make any kind of differentiation or, God forbid, discrimination on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, immigration status, etc., and anyone that does anything like that or even gives the appearance of doing anything like that or even hints that they might some day do something like that or expresses sympathy for people who would do something like that, that essentially should be banned from society entirely and through the use of law and through the use of economic sanctions and through the use of institutional power of every conceivable kind.

WOODS: Keith, before we go any further, I want you to take 60 seconds to describe for the audience what your own ideological mix consists of, because it makes what you're saying much more interesting. You're not just some guy at the Heritage Foundation denouncing PC; you're a much more, thank goodness, interesting person than that.

PRESTON: I am somewhat hard to classify, I suppose, but —

WOODS: Oh, you don't say (laughing).

PRESTON: But for the sake of brevity, I'll say I am a traditional left-wing, far left-wing anarchist in the tradition of thinkers like Max Stirner, Proudhon, Bakunin, Peter Kropotkin. In the 19th century, early 20th century the anarchists were actually considered the left-wing opposition to Marxism, so I'm actually to the left of Marxism, historically at least. I, as far as the type of anarchist I am, I'm what used to be called an anarchist without adjectives, in the sense that I embrace the entire paradigm of anarchist and anti-authoritarianism and anti-institutional-thinking, and I'm something of an amateur scholar of anarchist and anti-state movements. I'm very familiar with anarchocapitalism and Murray Rothbard, as well. So I come from that kind of background.

And the reason that I am as critical of political correctness as I am is because this is precisely the kind of thing that has been done by the hard reactionary left in the past. A lot of times when people think of authoritarian, reactionary, repressive governments and regimes, they think of things like Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy and right-wing military dictatorships in Latin America and things of that nature. But historically, far left regimes with a very statist and authoritarian orientation have been just as awful as anything you've seen from the Right, going back at least as far as the French Revolution. We see the French Revolution, which was supposed to be this revolution that was about liberation and overthrowing the oppression of the monarchy and the aristocracy and all of that, taking this turn where all of a sudden you have different radical groups that are sending each other to the guillotine and things of that nature.

We saw the same thing in Russia in 1917, where you had the czar abdicated and a kind of provisional government was formed that was a kind of quasi-democracy, including everything from liberals and constitutionalists all the way over to the anarchists and the Marxists and all of that. And then we saw a coup by the Bolshevik Party, who managed to get control of the army, who established a military dictatorship and instituted a kind of military command economy.

And I would argue that what is actually happening with political correctness, what I call totalitarian humanism or whatever we want to call it, is sort of another variation of that. This is another variation of authoritarian reactionary repressive ideology being pushed as a somehow means to liberation and progress and equality and all of these things. So when I criticize all of this stuff, it's really no different than when in the 19th century you had guys like Bakunin who were criticizing the Marxists of that time, saying, well, if you ever implemented these ideas in practice what you would get is what Bakunin called a "red bureaucracy" or a "red terror" that would be worse than

what came before, and that's exactly what happened. Everything Bakunin said about Marxism was true, and when Marxism was actually introduced in Russia, it became exactly what Bakunin said it would be. And I see the same thing happening now with this new form of totalitarianism that's emerged in recent decades.

WOODS: Let me play devil's advocate on the politically correct thing. Couldn't you say that throughout all of history and in all societies there have always been taboos? There have always been things that right thinking people don't think or say and that you would be shunned and your career destroyed if you did say them, so in some ways, let's say, at the height of bourgeois America, some of the very things that the PC groups today want to say, if you had said them then you would have had exactly the same kind of attacks on you that the bourgeois people have on them today. So isn't PC just another manifestation of a phenomenon that is endemic, that has existed in all societies? What's so special about it?

PRESTON: Well, in some ways it is very similar to the kinds of taboos and forms of repression that you have seen in past societies. I would actually probably agree with that in many ways. I think it's very similar, for example, to theocratic religious regimes, where you actually have restrictions on speech and religion and other things under the guise of blasphemy laws and laws that actually criminalize things like heresy and apostasy and things of that nature.

For example, even today if you go somewhere like Saudi Arabia you find that. You find that they have their own version of PC that's rooted in this particular Wahhabist interpretation of Islam, and if they can accuse you of blasphemy they can take you out and flog you or behead you or something like that. And I would also say that the comparison to the 1950s in some way is apt, because in the 1950s, you know, the Left will make a big to-do about how we had the phenomena of McCarthyism and anti-communist hysteria and writers that may have at one point said something sympathetic to socialism were accused of being agents of the Kremlin and all of that. Years ago I had a friend of mine who had been involved in the anti-Vietnam War movement before it became fashionable, you know, in the early 1960s; like 1962 he was actually involved in anti-Vietnam War protests, and he said in those days it was physically dangerous to protest the war in Vietnam. You'd have people who would come out and beat you up and call you a commie and things like that.

But I would say that that's exactly what the Left is doing today. Now it's the Left that's doing these kinds of things. In the mid 1960s the Left would say we want free speech at the universities and we want radical speakers to be able to speak on university campuses and people that oppose the war in Vietnam and things like that. Well, now that people of their ideological perspective actually control the university campuses, well, they're doing the same things that their former opponents were doing. They're simply trying to sensor and exclude points of view that don't conform to their ideological paradigm. And all of this is entirely predictable from the point of view of basic social science theory. One of the core insights of conflict theory in sociology is that former out groups, when they become powerful and fall into power, they often become just as abusive as whatever it is they replaced, often more so. For example, I

mentioned the Russian Revolution. When the Bolsheviks took over Russia, they actually took the remnants of the old czarist secret police and actually turned it into a secret police force of their own and actually made it a lot more efficient and therefore more pervasive and more repressive.

And we see that going on now on a more subtle level with this political correctness thing. We see exactly the things that the Left said they were fighting against in the 1950s and the 1960s coming into full fruition now once again and being given a leftist ideological cover. In the 1950s you had everyone being accused of being a communist. I think Joseph McCarthy would accuse Eisenhower of being a communist, and everybody and his brother was a communist back then. Nowadays everyone and his brother is a racist. People are afraid to even talk about the issue of race, because they figure, well, they're going to be labeled racist if they say something somehow that's offensive to someone.

And it's interesting, too, how these groups always cannibalize each other. Even within the circles of the hard left, people are always attacking each other for being racist or sexist or homophobic or transphobic in ways that to outsiders would just seem really bizarre and really over the top. But you can actually go online, and you can find writing, you can find videos of leftist meetings and things like that where this is actually going on. Someone is being attacked as a fascist or a racist or a sexist for deviating from some kind of ideological line by a fraction of a percentage point or something of that nature.

And this is the hallmark of totalitarian ideologies. That's how they are. They can never countenance any kind of dissent, and everyone is always a suspect, and everyone has to be under constant scrutiny to make sure no one's starting to deviate in any particular way.

WOODS: I want to ask this sort of follow up here. It seems to me that if you really did believe that American society was just hopelessly backward and it was full of reactionary bigots and it was a dangerous place for people of various kinds of minority status to live in, then wouldn't you think the appropriate response would be, a) we'd better get out of here, or b) we'd better break off from the rest of the U.S. or something? But it's never that. It's always, instead, we've got to basically shape these people up, get them in line, reeducate them, and we don't even care if in their heart of hearts they believe what we're saying. As long as outwardly they conform, we'll be happy. So in other words, it's an authoritarian response. It's not, well, you go your way and we'll go ours and we'll see if time heals some of these wounds. It's never that.

PRESTON: Well, that's one of the reasons why I call this philosophy totalitarian humanism, because it's implicitly a very state-centric philosophy. If you look at the kinds of ideas that people like this have about actual state policy — forget the philosophy itself, but what do they actually advocate in terms of actual state policies — the implicit assumption is that all of society should be subordinated to this particular ideology, which in turn has to be enforced by the state. For example, they generally have no regard whatsoever for the autonomy of civil society. They generally

think that institutions like the family – well, family is just a place where children get abused and daughters get molested and men beat their wives and things like that. Religion, well, that's just a place where people get brainwashed into believing backwards, unscientific superstition.

Or the local community, the local community, well, that's just a place where racist and bigots and homophobes have free rein to exclude whomever they want to exclude. If you ever talk about things like political decentralization with some of these people, like the idea that political power should be dispersed among localities and regions and there should be a balance of power between central governments and local governments and things of that nature, the first thing they will always invoke is Jim Crow and slavery. They will say, yeah, that's what Jim Crow was or that's what slavery was. And that's what the whole idea of ever dispersing power in society actually means to them.

So they don't have any regard for any principles of decentralization. They don't have any regard for the autonomy of civil society. They don't particularly care for many of the liberal traditional rights if they think this gets in the way of social justice, like free speech, freedom of religion, freedom of association. And they will tell you, freedom of association, that's just an excuse for racism. Freedom of religion, well, that's just an excuse to discriminate against gay people. Freedom of speech, that's just an excuse to vilify minorities and women.

Even things like due process now. One of the hallmarks of the Western common law legal tradition is that people who are accused of a crime are supposed to have the right to a fair trial and present evidence and innocent until proven guilty and things like that. One thing that's coming out of this rape culture idea now is that someone who was accused of rape should essentially be considered guilty until proven innocent. They say that if a woman accuses someone of rape, a man of rape, well, she should be believed, meaning that he's guilty until proven innocent. Now, of course rape is a serious crime. Accusations of rape should be taken seriously, just like accusations of armed robbery or carjacking should be taken seriously. But we don't say that people who claim to be victims of armed robbery should be believed no matter what and that the accused person is guilty until proven innocent, but to take this idea and really formalize it and institutionalize it within a legal context would essentially reverse centuries of Western jurisprudence. It would essentially overturn the Enlightenment. It would overturn the Magna Carta, and that's what these people want to do.

They want to have a type of society that if you were to apply everything these people say and take it seriously and institutionalize all of their ideas, what you would probably get is something kind of like a caste system. You would get a type of system where individual rights are assigned on the basis of group identity, and then groups would be assigned different rights based on how oppressed they've been in the past. Well, you know, for example, say blacks were oppressed in the past, so they need two votes per person rather than one vote per person, or maybe we should have a white privilege tax, or maybe we should have a male privilege tax or something of that nature. There's really no limit to the kinds of extremes you can take these kinds

of thinking to, and these people do take these kinds of things to really outlandish extremes.

Even today I see things that I think just a few years ago would have been considered a really bizarre and far-fetched extreme, but they do this. And I mean, among these groups of people there will actually be fist fights between vegans and vegetarians, or there will be physical altercations between, say, transgenders and what they call TERFs, which are trans-exclusionary radical feminists. These are feminists who don't like the transgender movement, because they would say, well, who are men to castrate themselves and then claim to be oppressed as women. They view this as an affront to feminism, and that's actually a big conflict now among the hard left, between the transgender movement and these trans-exclusionary feminists.

So from what I'm saying you can get a flavor of how bizarre and outlandish some of this becomes, but imagine if these kinds of people were actually put in control of the police, put in control of the actual legal system, the criminal justice system, the governmental apparatus in its entirety — not just fringe departments in universities, not just radical student groups and things of that nature. And we see that slowly starting to happen. Political correctness comes in multiple different forms. It comes in its more bizarre forms of the type you might find on some university campuses, and then it comes in a softer, more middle-of-the-road form that's already very well institutionalized.

One example I like to use is that a few years ago there was a shooting at Fort Hood, where a fellow — he was a — I think he held the rank of captain, and he was actually a psychiatrist in the Army. But he was also a Muslim and he was sympathetic to the jihadist movement, and he went on a shooting rampage and killed a number of fellow soldiers. And listeners have probably heard of this case; it was a famous case. But when that happened, however, some people raised the question of, well, maybe we just shouldn't have Muslims in the Army or maybe we should screen people in the Army who are Muslims or who might adhere to some kind of extremist ideology more carefully. And I'm not making any point about any kind of policy like that, but at the time there was a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, one of the highest ranking military officials in the United States who said that, well, you know, if we let this incident undermine our diversity in the Armed Forces, well, that's a greater tragedy than the incident itself, meaning that not having potential jihadists in the Army is a greater tragedy than mass murder. And this was one of the highest ranking military officials in the United States who said this.

So we see this kind of thinking now becoming increasingly pervasive throughout the entire society, and in its more middle-of-the-road forms it's already very well institutionalized. What we see on the college campuses is sort of a *Twilight Zone* version of this, where it's sort of like the theater of the absurd. But that kind of thinking is actually becoming increasingly pervasive in institutions as well.

WOODS: All right, so the book — I mean, I guess if you've listened to this episode you probably want to read the book, because I sure would if I were just listening for the

first time. It's *The Tyranny of the Politically Correct: Totalitarianism in the Post-Modern Age*. Linking to it at TomWoods.com/677. Let me give you one minute – and I mean 60 seconds; the clock starts as soon as I finish asking the question. Tell us what Attack the System is all about, because I'm going to link to Attack the System also at TomWoods.com/677. You ready? The little one-minute timer starts now.

PRESTON: Attack the System is a political tendency that advocates a philosophy that we call pan-anarchism, among other things. What we're trying to do is create a sort of an umbrella for all the different kinds of anarchism and overlapping philosophies for the purpose of actually creating eventually a united front for the purpose of attacking the state and taking down states all over the place, a kind of black flag coalition, if you will. And we're interested in connecting with people from other kinds of anti-state movements and libertarian and decentralist movements across the spectrum and building movements of this type. And Attack the System is also a forum where we have this kind of ideological framework that we're operating from, but then we also create a forum where all sorts of controversial topics can be debated within that kind of framework. And we're sort of an alternative to the left anarchist milieu that you see at some of these anti-WTO protests or things like that, in a sense that we're trying to create a form of anarchism where this kind of political correctness is not present, where it's actually open to free speech and freedom of opinion and freedom of association and all of those things.

WOODS: Well, it's very, very interesting, just as interesting as it sounds and very much worth checking out. So how do people get to Attack the System?

PRESTON: Just go to the website AttacktheSystem.com.

WOODS: All right, AttacktheSystem.com. TomWoods.com/677, we'll have that link and a link to the book. Keith, best of luck with it and thanks for your time today.

PRESTON: Thank you, Tom.