

INTRODUCTION

Dr John Coulter worked for twenty years as a medical researcher at the Institute of Medical and Veterinary Science (IMVS) in Adelaide, South Australia. During this time he was, in his private capacity, a leading environmentalist. He spoke out on many occasions on issues such as uranium mining and the hazards of environmental chemicals. In addition, Dr Coulter in the late 1970s headed within the IMVS a small mutagens testing unit. By testing substances for their capacity to cause mutations, a good indication of their potential for inducing cancer can be obtained.

Dr Coulter's activities posed a threat to various vested interests, in particular certain chemical companies and their supporters within the IMVS. For example, in 1979 Dr Coulter gave a lecture, in his private capacity, in which he mentioned the way the Velsicol company in the United States had handled information on the cancer-causing properties of two of their products, chlordane and heptachlor. After the lecture, Velsicol Australia complained about it to the Director of the IMVS — not directly to Dr Coulter.

Dr Coulter's work in the environmental mutagens testing unit also was unwelcome in some places. Dr Coulter on occasion tested substances such as polycyclic hydrocarbons to which workers or the public were being exposed. Furthermore, sometimes he gave reports of his testing to workers or trade unions as well as to the appropriate IMVS committees.

Dr Coulter was dismissed from his job at the IMVS on 30 June 1980. Several reasons were offered for the dismissal by the then Director of the IMVS. But in later court hearings, initiated by Dr Coulter to gain reinstatement, none of these reasons were substantiated. Therefore it seems a reasonable inference that Dr Coulter was dismissed not because of any deficiencies in his job performance, but because his environmental activities were found objectionable by certain people in positions of power.

The Coulter case has much more detail and further ramifications, some of which are described in later chapters. But this basic outline illustrates most of the key features of what we call *suppression of intellectual dissent* or, more briefly, *intellectual suppression*.

First, a person or group, by their public statements, research, teaching or other activities, threatens the vested interests of elites in corporations, government, professions or some other area. Typically this is by threatening profits, bureaucratic power, prestige or public image, for example by providing support to alternative views or by exposing the less attractive sides of the powerful group.

By speaking out on environmental issues, Dr Coulter provided support for community groups opposing policies of uranium mining companies, government departments and other powerful interests. By providing information about the hazards of environmental chemicals directly to workers, he provided support for workers and also undercut the power of employers to the extent to which it was based on a monopoly of information about health

hazards on the job. In short, the first main feature of suppression cases is a threat to vested interests.

The second feature of suppression cases is an attempt by a powerful individual or group to stop or to penalise the person or activity found objectionable. This may involve denying funds or work opportunities, blocking appointments, blocking tenure, blocking promotion, blocking courses, blocking publication, preventing free speech, dismissal, harassment, blacklisting, and smearing of reputations. These are examples of what we call *direct suppression*. *Indirect suppression* occurs when people are inhibited from making public statements, doing research and the like because of the implied or overt threat of sanctions or because of a general climate of fear or pressures for conformity.

Dr Coulter was directly suppressed by being dismissed. At the same time, the activity of testing for environmental mutagens was directly suppressed by the closure of the testing unit which he had headed. Indirect suppression is harder to pinpoint. But it is probably responsible for the rarity with which professional scientists speak up on social issues, and in the scarcity of scientific research, such as environmental mutagens testing, which is both directly useful to workers and community groups and which is made available to them.

There are several other typical features of suppression cases. For example, when complaints are made about a person's activities, they are usually made not to the person concerned, but to her or his boss. This occurred when companies complained to the IMVS about Dr Coulter's public statements. The companies' responses were to the source of power over Dr Coulter, namely the IMVS, rather than to the source of the information in question, namely Dr Coulter himself.

Another typical feature of suppression cases is a lack of any substantive reasons given for the action taken. In societies in which freedom of speech and inquiry are formally subscribed to, suppression is seldom justified by saying outright that public criticism or critical teaching is being penalised. "Acceptable" reasons usually are given: that a person has not been doing a satisfactory job, that a proposal is not a high enough priority to warrant funding, and so forth. In many cases such reasons are entirely correct; they are not the suppression cases we are concerned with here. We are concerned with the cases in which the suppression is entirely or in part a response to the expression of intellectual dissent, and in which other explanations for the suppression do not stand up to scrutiny.

Often it is difficult to "prove" conclusively that suppression of intellectual dissent has actually occurred. Only occasionally do suppressors openly admit their motivations and actions. Therefore the number of cases of suspected suppression is much larger than the number of cases in which suppression can definitely be said to be involved. Suppression can be strongly suspected whenever the formal reasons offered for penalising a person or activity are demonstrably inadequate. If the performance of a dissident — a person whose activities provide some challenge to prevailing views or interests — is not significantly worse than that of other individuals who are not dissidents and who are not punished, this is strong evidence of suppression.

For example, other scientists in the IMVS whose scientific performances were less impressive than Dr Coulter's were not dismissed. This suggests that explanations for his dismissal based on poor scientific productivity are suspect.

Suppression of intellectual dissent is only one kind of suppression. Also possible, and common, is suppression instigated because of a person's political affiliation or activity, ethnic origin, sex, sexual preference, age, religion, occupation, personality or superior competence. All these forms of suppression are vitally important. But to limit the treatment in this book we have focused mainly on intellectual suppression. For example, blocking of a person's appointment to a job because of her sex would not count as suppression of intellectual dissent, but blocking of a person's appointment because of her outspoken feminist views would fall into this category.

We have chosen to distinguish suppression from *repression*¹, reserving for the latter term

instances involving physical violence, such as beatings, imprisonment, torture and murder. Direct suppression thus essentially covers nonviolent restraint or inhibition of people or their activities: withdrawal of funds, jobs or publication outlets, damaging reputations, or harassment or social ostracism. *Oppression*, another term, refers to institutionalised lack of justice or freedom, such as apartheid, or poverty maintained by exploitative social arrangements. Oppression is often enforced by both suppression and repression.

Suppression is a general term, and both censorship and discrimination can be considered as types of suppression. In this book the unqualified use of the term suppression will refer to suppression of intellectual dissent.

Although suppression in any individual case is often difficult to demonstrate conclusively, we think the available evidence suggests that suppression is a widespread occurrence. How common is it? In some circumstances, suppression is the rule rather than the exception. For example, in authoritarian societies such as military dictatorships and communist regimes, suppression of dissident views is standard policy. In many countries in which routine repression occurs — torture, imprisonment and murder — such violent means of smashing dissent are essentially a supplement to routine suppression, such as firing dissidents from government employment and censoring the media.²

Although suppression is sometimes the initial, nonviolent aspect of attempts to deter and penalise dissent, with violent repression reserved for the more recalcitrant cases, the distinction is usually more complex. Suppression is essentially an expression of political power in circumstances in which knowledge and information rather than brute force is paramount. The very concept of “intellectual dissent” assumes the existence of a group of people who produce and distribute information, and of a standard set of ideas from which dissent can be made. Although suppression of intellectual dissent has occurred for thousands of years, it is especially characteristic of modern industrial societies with a high degree of literacy, in which communications and mass media are well developed, and in which the standard organisational form is bureaucracy.

Modern industrial societies are held together less by force than by common acceptance of the status quo. Of course, “common acceptance” may not be representative of the best interests of everyone: opinions can be shaped or manipulated through schooling and advertising, and perceptions of what is socially possible are shaped by the current distribution of social power and the existing social institutions. Those who are in the best position to shape perceptions of reality are those in powerful positions: elites in government, in government bureaucracies, in corporations. Intellectual dissent usually means dissent from the established policies or practices of elite groups. The most effective way for these groups to maintain their privileged and powerful positions is by shaping people’s perceptions, by making the existing distribution and use of power in society seem reasonable, beneficial and inevitable. If everyone saw things in these ways, there would be no need for direct suppression. It is usually only when individuals or groups criticise this state of affairs that elites resort to suppression.

Does suppression really matter all that much? Would not society carry on much the same with or without an extra amount of open dissent? We believe that suppression has important consequences for society. In some spectacular cases the stakes are enormous. A. Ernest Fitzgerald was sacked because he exposed cost overruns in United States military contracting. The overruns, which were being obscured by misleading accounting practices, which Fitzgerald revealed, amounted in the case of the C5-A transport aircraft to US\$200 million.³ John Bradley lost his job because he tried to expose shortcomings in the computer system used in the US missile tracking early warning system. At stake was the conventionally assessed security of the US people against nuclear attack.⁴

The success of either dissent or suppression also may decide whether millions of people are exposed to harmful drugs or environmental chemicals, whether dangerous defects in everyday consumer products are corrected, whether funds are diverted from the poor and the

ill, whether corrupt politicians or business executives remain in positions of power, and whether wars are fought under false pretences. But perhaps more fundamentally, suppression may make the difference between a society in which dissent helps sustain continual efforts to address social problems and a society in which intellectual conformity helps sustain domination by particular groups and exploitation of others.

It is important to make one point clear. We and most of the other contributors in this book do not wish to draw any conclusions about the motivations of those people who carry out suppression. Almost everyone has the best of intentions. Many of those who carry out suppression genuinely believe they are acting on proper grounds, such as ensuring top quality scholarship or preventing harmful public statements. Others carrying out suppression may justify it by appealing to what are for them higher goals, such as maintaining professional decorum or organisational efficiency. Rather than focusing on psychological motivations for suppression, we prefer to emphasise the social dynamics of the process, including mechanisms, contexts, power relationships and opposition to it.

Where is suppression most frequent? Indirect or institutionalised suppression — in which a climate of fear or threat of penalties inhibits dissent — is most common in authoritarian societies and organisations. For example, in communist countries significant open dissent from the line of the Communist Party is sure to cause repercussions, and will, among other things, severely limit potential career advancement. More generally, bureaucracy is an authoritarian form of social organisation: internal dissent is discouraged, and dissent to a public audience is usually severely penalised. The prevalence of bureaucracy has been increasing steadily in the last several hundred years, and as bureaucracy spreads so the market for dissenting ideas gradually shrinks.

It is no coincidence that the form of social organisation in which bureaucracy is most dominant and pervasive, namely communist regimes, is also where suppression of intellectual dissent is most rigorously enforced. But the importance of bureaucracy, and of suppression, has greatly increased in Western societies too. Government bureaucracies and large corporations (also organised in the form of bureaucracy) are the most important, but other parts of society are also bureaucratized, including churches, trade unions and academia. This means that intellectual activity is more and more done by professionals working for large bureaucratized organisations. Independent intellectuals are ever rarer, as are the channels by which they can express their opinions to more than a minority.

In these circumstances, intellectual dissent from within the ranks of intellectual workers plays an ever-increasing role. Dissidents may be found at any level in the flow of information. Journalists, writers, artists, librarians, secretaries, lawyers, engineers and computer programmers all play vital roles in the flow of information in modern industrial societies. Companies and governments can muster enough of their own experts to promote their own interests. On issues such as uranium mining, it rests to a considerable extent on professional intellectuals, such as John Coulter, to help present contrary views on a technical level. And if activities such as mutagen testing are to be done in the public interest, it often depends on individuals such as Dr Coulter to carry them out within a bureaucratic work setting and to make them available to a wider audience.

Although suppression is an important phenomenon in modern industrialised society, its significance has been generally overlooked in the West. The finger is often pointed at communist and other repressive governments, but the same problems at home are not seen in a coherent framework. Most often suppression is seen — if suppression is acknowledged at all — as an occasional abuse rather than a systematic occurrence. And periods such as the late 1940s and early 1950s, in which suppression became rampant — called in the United States the McCarthy era — are seen as a sort of aberration rather than a temporary accentuation of an ever-present problem. It is because the systematic discussion of suppression has been avoided in the West that we focus on suppression in the so-called "Free World". The problem is as bad and usually worse in communist countries and military dictatorships, but at

least the problem is well recognised. Suppression in the West also needs to be studied, exposed and resisted — not only to maintain freedom, but also to learn how to overcome suppression in countries where dissent is even less welcome.

Most of our case histories involve academic or scientific institutions. We chose this focus for several reasons.

First, academic institutions play a central role in the flow of information in modern industrial society. Not only are they primary centres for the creation and integration of knowledge, but they pass on that knowledge through teaching. They also play a major role in the training and certification of other information professions.

Second, although suppression is generally more frequent in government bureaucracies and corporations, well-documented cases of suppression in these areas are less frequent than in academic organisations. This is partly because there are fewer mechanisms in corporations and state bureaucracies by which to openly oppose suppression, and less access to information to expose it.

Third, science and academia are often said to be havens for dissent, under the protection of scientific freedom and academic freedom. By illustrating suppression in these areas, we hope to show by implication the pervasiveness of suppression in other areas in which intellectuals are employed. Finally, our own experiences are mainly in science and academia, and this experience gives us greater feeling for the operation of suppression in these areas.

Our emphasis on academic organisations should not be taken as any suggestion that suppression problems are less important in other parts of society. Indeed, we do not see a clear separation between bureaucracies and academia, but on the contrary perceive close similarities. Universities are often bureaucratic in many aspects of their operation. In addition, universities provide “tangible services”, namely the production of students with degrees, and of publications. This process is more easily quantified and evaluated than the “production process” of many governmental institutions. Another point here is the exchange of personnel between academia and other state bureaucracies, and the convergence of styles of work and work management in their arenas. For these reasons we see the chapter by Stuart Rees on authoritarianism in state bureaucracies as closely linked to experiences in science and academia.

Documented cases of suppression are in several ways an unrepresentative sample of all cases of suppression. As mentioned before, expectations of scientific and academic freedom mean that a disproportionate fraction of challenged and publicised suppression cases are from these areas. In addition, only some types of cases are readily documented: dismissals usually require justification, whereas blockings of appointments are difficult to verify. Documented cases of suppression overemphasise the major and dramatic events, such as dismissals and cutting off of funding, and underemphasise problems such as blocking of publication and subtle harassment by collegial disapproval. Documented cases also overemphasise instances in which channels for formal redress are available.

The nature of science and academia, and the unrepresentativeness of documented cases of suppression, lead to other biases. For example, there are relatively few documented cases of suppression of women dissidents in science and academia, since due to discrimination few women are found in science and academia in the first place, and those who are there are mostly in lower-level positions with less security and protection and therefore less opportunity for resisting or publicising suppression when it occurs. We have tried to overcome some of these biases, without being tokenistic. Nevertheless, our sample of cases is far from ideal. We only hope that the treatments here encourage the further study of other types and instances of suppression — and, even more importantly, resistance to suppression.

The documented cases here may suggest that suppression is a spectacular and therefore fairly rare occurrence. But in practice suppression is a routine phenomenon. When discrimination is institutionalised, as against women or against followers of a particular way of organising knowledge, then suppression can occur so effortlessly that it is difficult to

recognise. Once debate in an area of intellectual discourse is considered to be outside the realm of acceptability — for example the issue of fluoridation — then instances of overt suppression may be few. It is simply considered ridiculous to allow publication of the unorthodox opinion or to hire supporters of the unorthodox position. But in such cases suppression may be at work via interest groups and the squashing of challenges to received opinion. This has been the process behind most of the suppression of feminist critique, the subject of Cheryl Hannah's chapter: the power of men within tertiary institutions has been used in a routine way to silence challenges to patriarchal ideas, rather than normal academic processes being used to do this.

Routine, institutionalised suppression is often more important than the notable examples of overt suppression. But it is partly by studying the more dramatic instances of suppression, for which more information is available, that the dynamics of routine suppression can be elucidated.

Part One presents a set of case studies of suppression. These studies should give a feeling for what suppression is like at the nitty gritty level of dissident actions, harassment, patterns of action and responses. For several of the chapters we have invited comment from the institution implicated in the alleged suppression. If comment was received, we have invited the author of the chapter in question to respond. We have restricted the cases to those from Australia. To give an idea of the variety of other cases which have not been presented in such detail, a series of thumbnail sketches of other instances of suppression is presented.

Part Two begins with a chapter on the common origins of suppression cases in the vested interests embodied in the power structures in government, business and academia. The second chapter analyses the institutionalised suppression of feminist critique in universities. Next the role of authoritarian behaviour patterns in state bureaucracies is examined. The final chapter addresses academic suppression in the context of human rights.

Part Three addresses the question of how to oppose individual cases of suppression and more generally to oppose the institutional structures which give rise to suppression in the course of serving vested interests. Special attention is given to challenging suppression by obtaining publicity, and through social action. The final chapter looks in detail at how performance is evaluated in scientific and academic organisations, and thereby provides information for challenging suppression of dissidents whose job performance is adequate.

One final comment: not everything can be told about most suppression cases. Australian defamation laws are among the most severe in the world, and are often used to suppress free expression.⁵ Significantly, most defamation cases are brought by powerful organisations or leading public figures, the same groups who are more often responsible for suppression than victims of it. In most of the suppression cases documented here, there is information which cannot be revealed because of the possibility of attracting defamation suits. Suffice it to say that the extent and viciousness of suppression is certainly greater than can be spelled out here.

References

1. For definitions of political repression (including what is here called suppression) see Alan Wolfe, *The Seamy Side of Democracy: Repression in America* (New York: David McKay, 1973) and Robert Justin Goldstein, *Political Repression in Modern America from 1870 to the Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman, 1978), p. xvi.
2. On repression see the publications of Amnesty International. On both suppression and repression see the excellent journal *Index on Censorship*. A recent bibliography and analysis of repression can be found in Thomas Plate and Andrea Darvi, *Secret Police: The Inside Story of a Network of Terror* (London: Abacus, Sphere, 1983).
3. A. Ernest Fitzgerald, *The High Priests of Waste* (New York: Norton, 1972). A similar story, including dismissal of those who provide examples of waste, occurs in various branches of local and national government in the UK. See Leslie Chapman, *Waste Away*

- (London: Chatto and Windus, 1982), as well as his earlier *Your Disobedient Servant* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1978).
4. Rhonda Brown and Paul Matteucci, "The high cost of whistle-blowing", *Inquiry Magazine*, vol. 4, no. 15, 1 September 1981, pp. 14–19; Peter Pringle and William Arkin, *SIOP* (London: Sphere, 1983), pp. 109–12.
 5. Robert Pullan, *Guilty Secrets: Free Speech in Australia* (Sydney: Methuen Australia, 1984).