

Power and Distaste: Tolerance and Its Limitations

(October 2003): This paper came out of the work I had been doing with Bronwyn Winter and Sheila Jeffreys. I presented it at the Social Policy Research Centre at the University of New South Wales in September 2002. It got quite a good reception, probably because most of those present were friends and work colleagues. I then sent it to the *Australian Journal of Sociology* who rejected it. (The JoS readers' reports and my comments can be found after the paper. The notes all date from January 2004).

Abstract: The paper is divided into two parts, a short introductory section called 'The case for tolerance', and a longer section, 'Beyond tolerance', which contains the major part of the argument. The burden of that argument is that there are good reasons for thinking that tolerance is not the progressive virtue it is usually assumed to be. Rather, it is argued, tolerance is merely one more ruse of domination. It makes more palatable those social arrangements that work to the benefit of the already powerful and privileged, but it does not seriously bring them into question, much less challenge or threaten to undermine them.

The Case for Tolerance

There can be no doubt that tolerance has been generally, and for most purposes, regarded as a virtue. This is especially so in the case of the classical defenders of toleration. For John Locke, for example, exercising tolerance was both prudent and rational. It was prudent because it led to a peaceable and stable social order; and it was rational because it took account of the fact that belief cannot be coerced. It was a more genuinely Christian stance than the religious intolerance, with its attendant violence, which was rife during his own lifetime. Tolerance was 'the chief characteristic mark of the true Church' and the sign of 'charity, meekness, and good-will in general towards all mankind' (Locke, 1689).

For John Stuart Mill, tolerance was the royal road to truth. There can never be any good and sufficient reason for silencing the expression of opinion because no one can ever be in a position to know for certain whether or not it is false. Further, even if there are reasonable grounds for believing it to be false, it may still contain 'a portion of truth'. Truth is only arrived at 'by the collision of adverse opinions', and the silencing of any of these can only impede the discovery of the whole truth, which proceeds by way of open debate, not by closing it off. Again, even if any particular opinion does happen to be the whole truth, it will 'simply be held in the manner of a prejudice' unless it is allowed to be 'vigorously and earnestly

contested'. Its meaning will become 'enfeebled' or even lost altogether if it is never rejuvenated by being exposed to challenge and debate (Mill, 1859: 169).

More recently, Attracta Ingram argued for tolerance as basic to the pluralist ethos of liberal democracy. Because in such a society people 'subscribe to different, often incompatible conceptions of what makes life worthwhile' (Ingram, 1994: 97), tolerance is required as a way of maintaining a common life in the face of the conflicting claims made on it by the different moralities (p.178). Ingram linked tolerance to what she called 'the ideal of autonomy', that is, the idea that 'individuals have a moral personality that enables them to discern good and evil for themselves'. It entails the idea of 'choosing for oneself how one shall live, of progressively shaping one's own destiny by the deliberate choices one makes' (p.99). In this schema, tolerance is connected with equality and liberty. Each moral framework has as much right to exist as any other, no matter how incompatible they might be (with the proviso that they not involve harm to others); while the co-existence and mutual respecting of differences allows individuals the freedom to decide for themselves where to place their priorities.

If we look at what constitutes the opposite of tolerance, i.e. instances of intolerance, then the case for tolerance seems to become even clearer. Intolerance breeds violence. Voltaire's essay on toleration was written in reaction to the case of the Huguenot, Jean Calas, judicially murdered by Catholic fanatics in 1762 at Toulouse, on grounds which were as unsubstantiated as they were absurd (Voltaire, 1763; Brailsford, 1945). With a good deal of historical evidence on his side, Locke saw religious intolerance leading to 'the infliction of torments and exercise of all manner of cruelties'. It led men to 'deprive [other men] of their estates, maim them with corporal punishments, starve and torment them in noisome prisons, and in the end even take away their lives' (Locke, 1689: 1). Mill provided a number of well-known historical examples of the lengths to which the intolerant will go to suppress what are at the time unpopular or dissenting opinions which have been subsequently vindicated. He mentioned the case of Socrates, put to death 'after a judicial conviction, for impiety and immorality' (Mill, 1859: 142-3), and of Jesus, also executed according to the due process of the law, 'as a blasphemer' (p.143). He discussed the persecutions of the early Christians, the stoning to death of the first martyrs, and the religious wars and persecutions attendant on

the Reformation (p.144-7). 'History', he said, 'teems with instances of truth put down by persecution' (p.146). He was, however, inclined to see the chief form of intolerance in his own day as a matter of public opinion, itself a strong deterrent to the expression of ideas against the mainstream, but at least 'we do not now inflict so much evil on those who think differently from us as it was formerly our custom to do' (p.149). Mill cannot, of course, be criticized for failing to predict the history of the twentieth century, bursting at the seams with the most violent forms of intolerance ever seen on earth. And his point remains—intolerance in its most extreme form involves violence.

Since the history of the twentieth century is replete with instances of intolerance not only of unorthodox opinions, but also of people's very existence, it does seem as though the need for tolerance is even more urgent than ever. Millions of Jews were exterminated, not for their opinions or beliefs, but for what they 'were' defined in pseudo-biological terms by the evil regime which killed them. Hundreds of millions of people have suffered agonizing, premature deaths in the two world wars, in concentration camps and gulags, during or as a result of forced 'migrations', in brutal internecine conflicts, as the citizens of states ruled by monstrous dictators. The infliction of evil did not cease in the nineteenth century, but continued throughout the twentieth century and plumbed depths of abomination and horror unmatched in history.

Hence it would seem that tolerance, as a counter to intolerance, is a wholly good thing. Even Herbert Marcuse, generally (although wrongly) regarded as an opponent of tolerance, saw it as 'a liberating and humanizing force' (Marcuse, 1969: 124), and a prerequisite 'for the creation of a humane society' (p.96). He saw it as fulfilling 'a civilizing function ... namely, the protection of dissent' (p.131). If ever there were to be a free society, tolerance of thought and expression would be a necessity for 'finding the way to freedom' (p.102). '[T]he logic of tolerance' he said, 'involves the rational development of meaning and precludes the closing of meaning. ... [It is] persuasion through discussion and the equal presentation of opposites' (p.110). Marcuse did not think that genuine tolerance was possible under present conditions of society. But there can be no doubt that he approved of tolerance as an ideal to aim for.

Beyond Tolerance

But there are indications that tolerance may not be quite the unalloyed virtue it is generally perceived to be. Of course, there has always been an awareness that tolerance has its limits. Locke, for example, argued for intolerance of atheists because they 'deny the being of a God'. In Locke's view, they placed themselves outside 'the bonds of human society' because, by denying God, they denied the basis for the 'promises, covenants, and oaths' which maintained those social bonds. And they had no justification for asserting any claim to tolerance because they 'undermine and destroy all religion', and hence 'can have no pretence of religion whereupon to challenge the privilege of a toleration' (Locke, 1689: 18). He was also inclined to deny tolerance to 'Papists' on the grounds that they were potential traitors since they owed allegiance to 'a prince', i.e. the Pope, other than the ruler of their own country (Cranston, 1987: 109). As Maurice Cranston commented, these exclusions on Locke's part seem rather quaint these days. But at the time Locke was writing they made a kind of sense. And the point remains that discussions of tolerance have always allowed that it may not be an entirely unmixed blessing. For Mill, the limits to tolerance were summed up in the harm principle. As Mill saw it, this was a 'very simple principle': 'the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, ... whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties or the moral coercion of public opinion ... is to prevent harm to others' (Mill, 1859: 129). Mill's principle has turned out not to be so simple after all, largely because it is too individualistic. As John Horton commented: 'A common objection to Mill's principle is that it depends upon an untenable distinction between self- and other-regarding actions, for there are, so it is claimed, no significant actions which do not affect others' (Horton, 1985: 114).

Nonetheless, Mill's 'simple principle' can still provide good service for arguments outlining the limits to tolerance. Alex Callinicos argued, for example, for depriving fascism of a public voice, not because it is racist or because it gives offence, although it is and it does, but because it is inherently an incitement to violence (Callinicos, 1985: 67-72). He acknowledged some unease at departing from Mill's position by shifting the focus of attention 'from that of individual subjects and their actions to that of a social phenomenon'. But he also pointed out that there are limits to the extent to which liberalism can account for 'the terrors and dramas of our century', given the implausibility of its 'optimism about individuals' ability to control their circumstances' (p.70-1).

Susan Mendus also departed from the individualistic focus of Mill's original argument (although she did not explicitly say so). She argued the case for the censorship of pornography on the grounds of the harm it causes. It is not, she said, a private matter from which one can avert one's own eyes, but a corruption of the social environment. It 'destroys something of value', namely, 'the position of women as human beings', when it 'portrays women as objects or as inferiors' (Mendus, 1985: 111). This awareness that there are some things which need not, indeed must not, be tolerated is built into the history and meaning of the word. The classical arguments in favour of tolerance were first mounted in response to intolerable events, the wars, massacres, murders, tortures, forced deportations, imprisonments, destruction of life and property, visited on people for no other reason than that their religious beliefs differed from those in power. Hence, tolerance has always meant being intolerant of (certain kinds of) intolerance.

There is, however, a much more radical question to be asked about tolerance. This question does not assume that tolerance is essentially a good thing (although it may or may not be appropriate in certain situations). It asks whether tolerance is such a good thing after all. The question arises because investigations into the meaning of the term have uncovered some disquieting implications.

The first of these is that what is being tolerated must necessarily be something the tolerator feels distaste for, or even detests or despises or holds in contempt: 'Toleration ... is allowing, leaving undisturbed, something which you think is wrong' (Raphael, 1988: 139). To tolerate something is to leave it be, to refrain from doing anything about it even though I disapprove of it. I cannot be said to be tolerating something I view favourably, because I have no reason for preventing the expression of something I approve of, and hence no reason for restraining myself from opposing it.

Another disturbing implication of the meaning of tolerance is an intimate connection between tolerance and power. This might seem strange, given the connection between intolerance and violence (itself a form of power), and given that tolerance is, after all, the opposite of intolerance. But it is nonetheless the case that the exercise of tolerance requires power: 'It is widely agreed that power is a necessary condition of the exercise of toleration' (Nicholson,

1985: 161). Because I cannot be said to be tolerating something if I have no power to do anything about it, the idea of tolerance implies that 'the tolerator has the power to try to suppress or prevent (or at least to oppose or hinder) what is tolerated' (p.160). If I have no power to prevent something, I cannot be said to be tolerating it. I am merely enduring it, or putting up with it.

This raises serious questions about the traditional perception that there is a connection between tolerance and liberty. Marcuse saw tolerance as the prerequisite for a free society; Ingram saw it as intimately linked to autonomy; and it was the central theme of Mill's essay on liberty. But the above-mentioned connection between tolerance and power casts some doubt on any connection between tolerance and liberty.

In the first place, it is clearly not the case that tolerance and freedom are connected in the same person, in the sense that the more tolerant I am the freer I am. This is the way Peter Nicholson interprets it when he asks whether or not 'toleration involves a loss of freedom' (Nicholson, 1985: 166-9). (His answer is that, although tolerance imposes a duty on the tolerator to refrain from suppressing what is disliked or disapproved of, that duty does not make the tolerator unfree. Rather, the tolerator is exercising moral freedom by choosing to take a tolerant stance). But the point is not, as he seems to suppose, whether my tolerance of others makes me more or less free. Rather, the connection is an interpersonal one—the more tolerant I am of others, the freer they are; and the more tolerant others are of me, the freer I am. The point is that tolerance supposedly contributes to a freer society, and the freedom of each of us comes from our mutual tolerance of each other.

But there is something decidedly odd about this. It implies that my freedom is dependent on what someone else does (or doesn't do). But this cannot be the case, since dependence on another is not freedom. If I must wait upon someone else's action or inaction, then I am not free. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Freedom is not always the highest good. At the beginning of each human life, for example, other goods such as nurturance and recognition, both of which require dependence, are vital. But it makes no sense to hold that my freedom is not only dependent on someone else, but also dependent on the goodwill of someone who dislikes, disapproves of, feels distaste for or holds in contempt, what I do or say or believe.

It gives rise to the question of whether there is any connection at all between tolerance and liberty, whether in fact they are not opposites rather than being complementary.

In the light of considerations like these—the connotations of distaste and dislike, the intimate connection between tolerance and power, and the lack of connection between tolerance and liberty, at least in the sense that those who are tolerated are enjoying some kind of liberty—the notion of tolerance as a progressive virtue seems dubious indeed.

There have been some attempts to address the question of whether or not tolerance can be seen as wholly positive. Nicholson asked whether or not tolerance might be regarded as a kind of 'second-best' virtue, and came to the conclusion that, far from being a second-rate ideal, tolerance was 'a positive good, a virtue distinctive of the best people and the best societies' (Nicholson, 1985: 166). But he seemed to think that the argument that tolerance is second-best meant tolerance was a second-best to intolerance, that people would prefer to be intolerant but chose to be tolerant because the costs to themselves of intolerance were too high: 'not to be tolerant is exhibited as too costly, as ineffective, and as simply impossible beyond a certain point' (Nicholson, 1985: 164). But the question at issue is not whether or not tolerance is second-best to intolerance. The question is whether or not tolerance is inferior to something else, to acceptance, perhaps, or to a genuine respect for persons. In questioning the notion of tolerance, it is vital to retain the notion that tolerance is preferable to intolerance, that tolerance and intolerance are not the only two options available, and that there are forms of moral community which contribute more to human well-being than tolerance does.

Nicholson's argument for what he calls 'the positive case for toleration' is an account of just such a moral community, where each member respected the beliefs, opinions, choices and decisions of others: 'part of being moral, and of treating other agents morally, is to give serious consideration to their ideas' (p.165). But is 'tolerance' the right word for this? The notion of giving serious consideration to the ideas of others contains no connotations of distaste nor of the power to suppress, and without those connotations is it really tolerance we're talking about? While Nicholson (among others—Mendus, ed., 1988) makes a good case for the importance of respect for persons, it does not follow that tolerance is the best way to ensure this.

This is especially the case where tolerance is required, not so much of what people believe, do or say, but of what people are, people of minority races and cultures, for example, whose presence the dominant majority is being asked to tolerate in their midst. Once it is no longer a question of what people believe but of what they are, to couch it in terms of 'tolerance' has very worrying implications. While it may be quite reasonable to find what others believe or say or do distasteful, it is entirely unreasonable to feel distaste for what they are. Of course, what people are is often entangled with what they believe, especially (although not only) in the case of religious minorities, hence the confusion between tolerance of beliefs or opinions and tolerance of people. But there is something rather frightening about the idea of tolerating people. What does it mean to refrain from trying 'to suppress or prevent ... to oppose or hinder' (Nicholson, 1985: 160) people? It seems to imply that racism and prejudice are all right as long as the tolerators refrain from physical violence and murder. But if tolerance coexists with bigotry, then it is hardly 'a virtue distinctive of the best people and the best societies', as Nicholson said. Certainly, what is required here is respect for persons and for the diversity of ways of being human. But this is something radically other than tolerance with its implications of power-over and distaste.

But there are still problems with interpreting tolerance as respect for persons even if tolerance is confined to what people believe. Am I respecting them if I find their ideas 'alien or unpalatable, or even evil'? (Nicholson, 1985: 165). Ought I to? Ought I to respect people who say or do things that I find repulsive, detestable or just plain wrong? Perhaps my respect for them as human beings involves not accepting what they say or do if I find it wrong. This is possibly part of what Herbert Marcuse meant when he said (in his paper, 'Repressive Tolerance') 'the telos of tolerance is truth'. He was saying that a commitment to tolerance does not involve accepting truth's opposites, e.g. lies, mistakes, illusions, deceptions, distortions, etc.

And yet it has been argued that to disagree with, criticize or reject someone's ideas, or walk away from their behaviour, does constitute intolerance. Joseph Raz says he finds no reason for confining the meaning of intolerance to 'the use of coercion', and that 'an expression of a hostile view' can also be construed as intolerance (Raz, 1988: 163). But there is a very good reason for keeping the meaning of intolerance focused on coercion. Negative judgement, even

hostility, does not in itself count as intolerance, since tolerance, too, involves negative judgement. The difference between them consists in the presence or absence of attempts to silence, and attempts to silence involve coercion in one form or another. But beyond that, to widen the meaning of intolerance to cover all forms of negative judgement is to call 'intolerant' any form of criticism, disagreement, disapproval, etc, whatsoever. It is that 'pure' tolerance which is thoroughly intolerant because it precludes criticism, even the most well-founded. For if everything is acceptable, nothing is available for criticism.

To avoid such an absurd conclusion, it is advisable to keep coercion as part of the meaning of intolerance. This is not, as Raz seems to think, an idea 'developed by political theorists to express a particular point of view'. It is part of the meaning of the term 'intolerance' that it connotes the actual exercise of a power of censorship or prevention, just as 'tolerance' implies the ability to exercise such a power while refraining from using it. So criticism, disagreement, distaste, even hostility, are not intolerance, as long as the only power the critic has is that of reason and persuasion. Of course, they're not tolerance either. The question of tolerance doesn't even arise. If I have no power to prevent others expressing their opinions, I can't be said to be refraining from exercising that power.

Power is as central to the exercise of tolerance as it is to the exercise of intolerance. The tolerant are those with the power to ban the expression of what they dislike or disapprove of but who refrain from exercising that power, while the intolerant are those who do not refrain but who exercise their power to coerce others into silence. If that is the case, then tolerance is something that is needed in an imperfect world, just as Maurice Cranston has suggested. 'Toleration is a second-best', he said, an option available to ameliorate the worst effects of 'an imperfect world' and one 'to be cherished' given the world's imperfections (Cranston, 1987: 102). It is needed in order to prevent something worse, either the violence which intolerance so often brings in its wake, or an enforced uniformity. Cranston said no more about the nature of this 'imperfect world'. But once the connection is made between tolerance and power, it becomes clear that it is a world of domination. Intolerance involves power over others expressed overtly; tolerance mitigates the worst effects while leaving the relations of power intact.

In that case, the question arises: To whom is tolerance being recommended? Obviously, to those who have the power to enforce silence, either through overt violence or through institutionalised ways of excluding certain voices from the public domain. Tolerance is a virtue of the dominator, a kind of noblesse oblige, like magnanimity or paternalism, a stance which mitigates the worst effects of relations of ruling by refraining from imposing them harshly. Equally obviously, tolerance is not available to those who have no power 'to prevent or hinder': 'dissenting minorities do not have the power to suppress, so ... the idea of toleration [on their part] does not arise' (Raphael, 1988: 152). So recommendations concerning the exercise of tolerance are addressed to those in positions of power; they are irrelevant to classes of persons for whom the option of toleration is not available because they do not have the power to be intolerant. The 'we' to whom tolerance is recommended are the powerful (including those who exercise the power of physical violence). The rest of us, who only have reason and persuasion on our side, are tolerated—or not. Either way, we have no choice in the matter. But while being tolerated is preferable to being suppressed or exterminated, there is something patronizing, even insulting, about being tolerated. Is that really what we want? A society divided into the tolerant and the tolerated is still a society divided by hierarchies of power.

What Marcuse was calling for was not intolerance but a critical eye, a stance of moral and political opposition to domination leading eventually to revolution: 'it would be ridiculous to speak of a possible withdrawal of tolerance with respect to these practices and to the ideologies promoted by them. For they pertain to the basis on which the repressive affluent society rests and reproduces itself and its vital defences—their removal would be that total revolution which this society so effectively repels' (Marcuse, 1969: 116). So tolerance is not a wholly good thing because it is another ruse of domination. Being able to see this, however, depends on being able to see structures of domination in the first place. It requires being able to see that we are not already free and equal, and that some of us are powerless to change what we find intolerable. It means being able to see a world ruled by men who are grossly out of touch with humanity, their own as well as anyone else's; a world where women and children are enslaved and trafficked because men have a bizarre need to use them as penis receptacles. It means economic arrangements which ensure obscene accumulations of wealth in the hands of the few and the destitution of hundreds of millions; nation states which use

the means of 'legitimate' violence against their own citizens and absolve themselves of responsibility for their welfare; the 'systematic moronization' (Marcuse's term) purveyed by the mass media owned by the rich and powerful. This is not a good society, far less is it the best that can be conceived. But until such conditions can be overcome, tolerance will have to do, since the only alternative allowed by the system, intolerance, is worse.

References

- Brailsford, H. N. (1945) *Voltaire* London, New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press
- Callinicos, Alex (1985) 'Repressive Toleration Revisited: Mill, Marcuse, MacIntyre', in Horton and Mendus, eds
- Cowling, Maurice, ed. (1968) *Selected Writings of John Stuart Mill* New York, Toronto and London: Mentor Books
- Cranston, Maurice (1987) 'John Locke and the Case for Toleration', in Mendus and Edwards, eds
- Dworkin, Andrea (1981) *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* London: The Women's Press
- Griffin, Susan (1981) *Pornography and Silence: Culture's Revenge Against Nature* New York: Harper and Rowe, Publishers
- Horton, John (1985) 'Toleration, Morality and Harm', in Horton and Mendus, eds
- Horton, John and Mendus, Susan, eds (1985) *Aspects of Toleration: Philosophical Studies* London and New York: Methuen
- Ingram, Attracta (1994) *A Political Theory of Rights* Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Jones, Peter (1985) 'Toleration, Harm and Moral effect', in Horton and Mendus, eds
- Lederer, Laura et al, eds (1980) *Take Back the Night: Women on Pornography* New York: Bantam Books, 1982
- Locke, John (1689) 'A Letter Concerning Toleration', in R. M. Hutchins, ed. *Great Books of the Western World, 35: Locke, Berkeley, Hume* Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica/William Benton, 1952
- Marcuse, Herbert (1969) 'Repressive Tolerance', in Wolff, Moore Jr and Marcuse, 1971
- Mendus, Susan (1985) 'Harm, Offence and Censorship', in Horton and Mendus, eds
- Mendus, Susan, ed. (1988) *Justifying Toleration: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Mendus, Susan and Edwards, David, eds (1987) *On Toleration* Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Mill, John Stuart (1859) *On Liberty*, in Cowling, ed.
- Nicholson, Peter P. (1985) 'Toleration as a Moral Ideal', in Horton and Mendus, eds
- Raphael, D. D. (1988) 'The Intolerable', in Mendus, ed.
- Raz, Joseph (1988) 'Autonomy, Toleration, and the Harm Principle', in Mendus, ed.
- Voltaire (1763) 'A Treatise on Toleration', in *Selected Works of Voltaire* The Thinker's Library, No. 54 London: Watts and Co., 1948
- Wolff, Robert Paul, Moore Jr, Barrington and Marcuse, Herbert (1971) *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* London: Jonathan Cape

Journal of Sociology

My comments on the readers' reports

(January 2004): All three readers from the *Journal of Sociology* missed the main point of my paper—that it was a critique of tolerance on the grounds that it was yet another ruse of domination.

The first reader seemed to think the paper was a kind of confused argument in favour of tolerance—all the references he (?) recommended for me to read accept the notion of tolerance unreservedly. They present argument after argument and example after example to show that tolerance is vitally necessary because of the continuing prevalence of violent intolerance. These are all worthy arguments, and I agree with most of them as far as they go, i.e. that tolerance is better than the fanaticism that seems to be behind the killing and maiming that occurs daily somewhere in the world. But I'm not convinced that tolerance is an answer, simply because it ignores the dimension of power. It ignores the worldwide economic domination of the US, and the fact that fanaticism could gain no purchase were it not for conditions of appalling deprivation visibly engineered by the US through its ownership and control of such global institutions as the World Bank, the IMF, the WTO, etc. What's tolerance got to do with it?

The second reader could see I was criticising the notion of tolerance and he (?) disagreed with my criticism. But these 'disagreements' need not be taken too seriously since they merely reproduced points I had already made in my paper. For example, he said that it is not a criticism of the notion of tolerance to point out that it 'presupposes' distaste because 'distaste is precisely what tolerance is addressing'. Well, yes, that's what I said. But the important point is *how* tolerance addresses distaste—not by abolishing it, but by refraining from acting on it while still preserving it. In the next sentence, this reader acknowledges that tolerance doesn't

abolish distaste, when he asserts that 'tolerance is a recommended necessity' because of the difficulty of 'proscribing distaste and aversion'. Since that is pretty close what I argued in my last paragraph (although I talked about the difficulty of abolishing the conditions of domination, rather than of 'proscribing distaste and aversion'), it hardly constitutes an objection to what I said.

He returned to this point in his last paragraph when he said that my 'closing comments seem to be an abandonment of the main argument in favour of the adversary's position—i.e. that in a world riven with power, exploitation and domination, toleration will have to do'. I don't know what 'the adversary's position' is, since what he says after the 'ie' is my own position, the one I argued. The adversary I am arguing against is the one who holds that tolerance is all there is, that there is no need for any higher or more humane ideal, and who cannot see the ways in which tolerance can help to maintain relations of power and domination.

His argument about power is also a reiteration of what I said (although in a bowdlerised form). I acknowledged that tolerance 'exists to counterbalance ... power asymmetries'—it 'mitigates the worst effects' of domination, I said. I also said, however, that that mitigation, although real enough, left intact the relations of power responsible for the intolerance in the first place. This reader's reference to 'positive laws' and 'the state' substantiates my point, it doesn't refute it.

Moreover, I'm not sure 'asymmetry' is quite the right word to designate some of the gross disparities of power I have in mind. Think, for example, of the disparity between, on the one hand, the rich who don't want to pay their taxes along with the government authorities doing their bidding, and on the other hand, those people whose health, well-being and (sometimes) lives depend on the public utilities those same authorities are starving of resources; people such as the seriously ill who die because

hospital staffing levels are dangerously low; such as the small children who are killed or so horribly brutalised they will never be fully human because the government welfare agency is deprived of the means for rescuing them from the abuse; such as the young adults so demoralised at the impossibility of ever having a job with a living wage and a sense of self-respect that they kill themselves or clutch wildly at despairing addictions; such as the old, vilified as an 'aging population' by the mainstream press and the policy pundits busily generating fear and loathing in the generation those same aged people raised to adulthood and, more often than not, supported thereafter as well. Think, too, of the obscene accumulations of wealth in the hands of the few generated by the capitalist mode of production, and the fact that around one sixth of the world's population don't have enough to eat. Each of these instances is something more than an 'asymmetry', and none will be rectified by 'tolerance'. I gave examples like these in the paper, and all three readers ignored them.

The third reader, like the first, seemed to think I was simply mounting a confused argument for tolerance, vide his (?) request for 'the author's own definition of tolerance', his recommendation that I check out 'Rawls', Macedo or Gray's idea' and 'recent debates on tolerance', and his criticism that I 'overlooked' an 'important argument' about tolerance. All these were asking for greater clarity about the notion of tolerance, but none addressed those connotations of the term that were central to my argument, namely power and distaste.

The general objections these readers raised were that the paper wasn't sociological enough (readers 1 and 3) and that it wasn't original (readers 2 and 3). As far as the second of these objections goes I suspect that, contrary to the readers' opinions, the arguments in the paper were indeed original, so original in fact that they couldn't even see them.

In the case of the objection that it wasn't sociological enough, two reasons were given. The first was that I didn't discuss recent events—'in today's complex post September 11th, post-Bali world' (reader 1), 'The Rushdie Affair' (reader 3)—and that the paper was therefore too abstract; the second, that I didn't discuss recent debates on tolerance.

My response to the comment about recent events is that I don't see them in terms of tolerance. It's true that those who committed the atrocities so airily referred to by the first reader could be seen to be intolerant of those they killed, but I did discuss the connection between intolerance and violence in the paper. Moreover, the intolerance was being directed towards the exploitative, domineering and decadent West, not the particular people unlucky enough to be in the World Trade Center and the Sari Club at the relevant times. Inexcusable as the violence was, and however innocent its victims, couching the issue in terms of 'intolerance' doesn't take us very far. As for 'The Rushdie Affair', the world really doesn't need another screed about it. And anyway, all these readers' recommendations are saying is that I ought to be arguing that tolerance is a good thing—look at the nasty things that happen when tolerance is absent! They have completely missed my point that tolerance and intolerance ought not to be the only alternatives. (Well, reader 2 didn't entirely miss it—he disagreed with it. Or he thought he did when he said 'There are many examples of systemic attempts at finding alternatives (eg multi-culturalism)'. But in fact he substantiated it because multi-culturalism is actually a form of tolerance, not an alternative to it).

As for the recent debates on tolerance, from what I have read of them (including Walzer's *On Toleration* and Rawls' *The Law of Peoples*, mentioned by readers 1 and 3), all are simply panegyrics to tolerance. Since my argument is a critique of tolerance, they are of little use to me.

Department of Sociology
Faculty of Social Sciences
Flinders University of SA
Adelaide
30.9.02

Dear Dr Thompson,

Re: Power and distaste: Tolerance and its Limitations

Thank you very much for sending the above paper to the *Journal of Sociology* for consideration. We have carefully considered the paper and regrettably we are unable to accept it.

All three authors felt that while the paper had merit it was not suitable for our audience as it primarily drew upon classical political theory. Referee #1 recommends some material that would make it more suitable for a sociological audience while referee #3 suggests further engagement with recent events. All felt the paper would be better suited to another journal.

We do thank you very much for sending your paper to our journal and hope that this feedback, while negative, does encourage you to rework this material. We look forward to further submissions from you in the future.

Yours sincerely,

[...]

Managing Editor

Reader #1, *Journal of Sociology*

Power and Distaste: Tolerance and its Limitations

Referee's Report

In today's complex post September 11th, post-Bali world,¹ the question of tolerance is a crucial one. In Australia, with its multicultural myths and realities, the benefits and limitations of tolerance are of enormous potential value to Australian sociology. However, this paper does not situate the case for and against tolerance within the immediacy of sociological issues related to power and tolerance. The author presents a well-written, clear essay on the case for tolerance and beyond, but draws primarily on classical political theorists Locke and Mill, then on Marcuse and Ingram. There is little use of contemporary literature in the rich area of tolerance, particularly to do with group identity, multiculturalism, citizenship and difference, issues that are explicitly sociological. Given the author's

use of Mendus 1985 and 1988, I recommend Horton and Mendus eds. 1999, *Toleration, Identity and Difference*, or Walzer, 1997 *On Toleration* or Lash and Featherstone's eds 2002, *Recognition and Difference*. The author may consider the benefits of re-doing the paper with a less abstract focus and a more explicit, sociological focus, that synthesises the theory and practice.

I offer some suggestions:

- p.2, last parag - what were the 'unsubstantiated and 'absurd' grounds?²

- p.3 If Mill saw intolerance as a matter of public opinion - what does the author see it as now?³

- p.3 what are some of 'the most violent forms of intolerance'?

Why does Mill's point remain - that 'intolerance in its most extreme form involves violence'?

Give examples of intolerance after world war II.

- p.4 parag on Marcuse - author needs to unpack it, go beyond describing Marcuse's views. Eg. Under what conditions did Marcuse think tolerance was possible?⁴

- p.6 the example of intolerance to pornography is entirely appropriate, but there are so many other contemporary sociological issues that could be used.⁵

- p.7 argument about power and tolerance - needs prior definitions of what author believes 'tolerance' is.⁶

- p.9 - idea of 'moral community' - to what degree is Australian society exhibiting such?⁷

- last parag. on minorities and religious minorities - give this a clear focus

- 'respect for persons' - 'diversity', emphasise this more as crucial contemporary application of tolerance.⁸

Notes

1. Need I comment on the banality of this opening phrase? It reads like one of the more crass forms of tabloid journalism. There's no attempt at analysis, no indication of what the author thinks is the connection between these events and tolerance, just a throw-away line tossed off with a facile insouciance that does a grave injustice to the events in question. If this is typical of 'Australian sociology', I'm glad I'm not writing it.

2. Their religious beliefs. I would have thought that was too obvious to need spelling out.

3. Why is this a relevant question, given that I was critiquing *tolerance* not

intolerance? Ditto for the next two questions and the request for examples.

4. My argument was not about the possibilities of tolerance, but about its limitations. Once again, the question's not relevant.

5. But why should they have been? One can always think of things the author hasn't covered. This kind of comment is the lazy reviewer's cheap way of not addressing what was actually argued.

6. I'm at a loss—the whole paper is a definition. What on earth is this person talking about?

7. Hardly at all, I would have thought, with its 'leaders' (so-called) pushing the values of callous xenophobia, elitism and sycophancy as essential to the Australian ethos. It's certainly not my 'moral community'. But the fact that no genuine moral community exists in Australia (or any other nation state) does not mean that one should therefore dispense with the ideal. Indeed, the *lack* of a moral community is all the more reason to hold fast to that ideal. And anyway, what does it have to do with my argument?

8. Clearly this person has understood nothing of what I said. Far from arguing that 'respect for persons' was a 'crucial contemporary application of tolerance', I explicitly ruled it out by distinguishing between tolerance and respect for persons. How can one be said to respect someone for whom one is feeling distaste?

Reader #2, *Journal of Sociology*

'Power and Distate [sic]: Tolerance and its Limitations'

The paper has an interesting theme and shows some promise however I am not sure that [it] is suitable material for a JOS audience. Further, the argument lacks originality and is not sufficiently developed to warrant publication.

There are a number of substantive problems with the argument. The greatest of these is that the author's criticisms of tolerance seem to me to be void. The author claims to uncover the meanings and facts of life hidden beneath tolerance when these are the very meanings and facts that tolerance purports to accommodate. For example, the point that tolerance presupposes distaste can hardly be rated a criticism

when distaste is precisely what tolerance is addressing. Since distaste for other people's choices is one of life's eternal¹ and since it is much harder to proscribe distaste and aversion, tolerance is a recommended necessity. Further, the criticism that tolerance implies power also seems to me void since this is precisely why tolerance is recommended: as a brake on the application of such power subsequent to aversion (eg Locke's plea for Protestants to tolerate and stop persecuting Catholics). Tolerance not only recognizes the existence of power asymmetries (otherwise there would be no imprecation to constrain power), it also exists to counterbalance them. I am not convinced that the mechanisms of tolerance really are 'goodwill' and '*noblesse oblige*' since tolerance is often enshrined in positive laws designed to protect the dissenting weak from the aversions of the powerful. The tolerant state is also the impersonal, neutral, universalistic and, especially, legalistic state.

Neither has it been properly argued that there is, in fact, a 'lack of connection between tolerance and liberty' (p.8) (in fact the historical evidence presented in the first few pages suggests otherwise). A statement is not an argument.

p.13: Is it really only tolerance or intolerance that 'the system' will allow? There are many examples of systemic attempts at finding alternatives (eg multi-culturalism).

Finally the closing comments seem to be an abandonment of the main argument in favour of the adversary's position - ie that in a world riven with power, exploitation and domination, toleration will have to do. Since most advocates of tolerance make much the same admission and since much of the author's evidence supports the adversary's position, perhaps a revised paper (possibly submitted to a more theoretically minded journal) could look for a new or middle ground position (or else incorporate more concrete evidence in support of the existing argument).

Note

1. This is a rather abstract concept, isn't it? Certainly, it's far more abstract than anything in my paper. And it hardly qualifies as a sociological term.

Reader #3, *Journal of Sociology*

Manuscript title: Power and Distate(?? or distaste: BM): Tolerance and its Limitations

Review: Comments

I would recommend against publication of the manuscript Power and distate(????): Tolerance and its Limitations in *Journal of Sociology*. The major reasons for my recommendation against publication in JS is that the article is very descriptive, does not offer any original insight to the debate on toleration

and its argument is not so well informed and does not address the main real problems or developments connected with this issue.

The first part of the paper, *The case for tolerance*, is a general overview of well known and discussed thoughts of the classical defenders of toleration (Locke, J.S. Mill). It finishes with an uncritical, one paragraph long discussion of Marcuse's views.

In the second part, *Beyond Tolerance*, which aims to show that 'tolerance is not the progressive virtue it is usually assumed to be', the author looks into 'the meaning of the term' and discovers 'some disquieting implications' (p.6). While it is obvious that there are different definitions of the notion, maybe it would be useful to establish what is the author's own definition of tolerance.

Without going into the debate whether the author is right that there is 'something decidedly odd' (p.8) about the assumption that my tolerance of others contributes to a freer society, I want to suggest she/he overlooks the important argument that my tolerance of others contributes to me being a different person, namely, a less authoritarian person, therefore, as it is argued in the literature, more suitable for democracy.

Moreover, I think the author's failure to differentiate between distaste and hostility or criticism and hostility - makes his/her argument really too simplistic and naive. There is not only nothing new in the author's conclusion that 'tolerance is not wholly good thing because it is another ruse of domination' (p.13) but, it is, according to me, too narrow and too simpleminded approach. Checking, for example Rawls', Macedo or Gray's idea would be helpful here.

The recent debates on tolerance, especially after *The Rushdie Affair* (after the publication of *The Satanic Verse*), are very interesting and they are raising many important issues. However, there is no mentioning any of them in the paper.

My other main objection is connected with the paper's lacking any sociological input in theory of toleration. New importance of the issue [of] tolerance and the emergence of new questions about tolerance, which are the results of social, political and economic changes occurring around us (e.g. multiculturalism, etc) as well as of theoretical developments, which have been trying to grasp the meaning of these alternations [sic—alternatives?] - should have been discussed. Moreover, the paper is not only too descriptive but it also relies too heavily on quotations to make its points.