



Speaking Respect, Respecting Speech

Richard L. Abel

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The feminist campaign against pornography, the furor over a racial epithet in the O. J. Simpson trial, and Iran's continuing threat to kill Salman Rushdie exemplify the intense passions aroused by hurtful speech. Richard Abel offers an original framework for understanding and attempting to resolve these pervasive and intractable conflicts. Drawing on sociological theories of symbolic politics, he views such confrontations as struggles for respect among status categories defined by nationality, religion, race, gender, sexual orientation, and physical difference. Abel convincingly exposes the inadequacies of the conventional responses to speech: absolutist civil libertarianism and enthusiastic state regulation. Instead, he argues, only apologies exchanged within the communities that construct collective identities can readjust social standing damaged by hurtful words and images. In recasting the problem in terms of equalizing cultural capital, Abel opens a new pathway through the wrongs and rights of speech.

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