



Politically Correct 4.0: Historical causes and cultural evaluation

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Abstract

The current form of political correctness has many cultural roots; these explain why its underlying quest for social justice has become a dangerous ideology. This article addresses the political, religious and philosophical roots of this phenomenon. It also sets forth ways of avoiding dangerous extremism while holding onto the demands for justice often associated with political correctness.

Keywords

Political correctness, Individualism, Constructivism, Calvinism, Realism, Nominalism

Introduction

There are many ways of talking about political correctness. Often the discourse about this issue tends to confound linguistic and social attitudes with political issues so that any debate ends up by talking about left and right politics, losing sight of the linguistic side. However, it is this linguistic approach that many people embrace, hoping to change politics through changing words or cancelling texts. This kind of approach relies on a constructivist paradigm, according to which communication creates reality. This paradigm opposes a more realist one that considers communication to be the result of real social change. In this article I will limit the discussion of political correctness to its linguistic sense while exploring the cultural history that led to the relevance of the issue to the contemporary political and social debate.¹

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Linguistic Political Correctness 4.0² is the current extreme ideology that has resulted from the understandable attention paid to social justice that emerged in the post-war period in the US and spread worldwide. The root of any disruptive ideology is a deranged, unbalanced, isolated truth that is violently propagated. Human beings tend to be ideological, as Vasilij Grossman explained well (Maddalena 2023), and they always have been, but twentieth-century mass society and the current technology based on social networks and artificial intelligence have certainly increased this tendency in both breadth and depth, making it plausible to envisage a world divided into small ideological tribes, segregated and self-referential.³

A discussion about the new form of linguistic political correctness requires the elaboration of many details, especially to identify its understandable demands for social justice, mostly generated from the social and political situation of the US. However, to simplify, it may be worth using a list that arises out of legitimate requests for justice that can be grouped and listed as follows: it is right (1) to rebel against physical and psychological abuse; (2) that one's identity be respected; (3) to avoid the physical or moral lionisation of those who do wrong, as can be seen in the fact that we do not approve of statues of Hitler or Stalin; (4) to take a stand when one believes in something and to try to persuade others; and (5) that someone speaks only when that person is truly competent in a particular field. These demands of justice determine various kinds of behaviours, all manifested in language, that form the galaxy of the new political correctness. A parallel set of these behaviours can be listed as follows: (1) extreme sensitivity to the uses of language and to the formulae that comprise it; (2) attention to misgendering—the error of attributing gender and the countermeasures that are taken (the use of schwa and asterisks in Italian, plural pronouns in English, neutral -e and -es in Spanish, etc.); (3) the habit of discarding texts and artworks exhibiting a ‘wrong’ message (‘cancel culture’); (4) the tendency to reprimand those who do not participate in an ideological campaign; and (5) the stigmatisation of cultural appropriation, meaning that only someone belonging to a minority can speak about that minority.⁴

None of these habits or points of view is unreasonable per se, but they become so when they generate a univocal mentality that forbids the right to suspend judgements or to be neutral on certain topics, hindering freedom of thought and speech, rejecting scientific and moral doubts or even ironic scepticism and the approval of new forms of discrimination. A balanced approach to the topic requires scientific study. The purpose of this article is to begin delving into the historical–cultural factors that created the ideological version of linguistic political correctness and to suggest paths that resist these extremisms without abandoning the righteous intentions behind them.

Three cultural roots: political philosophy, religion and epistemology

The political root

The first hint of linguistic political correctness dates back to the 1930s,⁵ identified in the work of the linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf (1940). Later on, in the 1970s, the attention of

linguists was drawn to social concerns arising from the social justice battles of the 1960s. This origin has determined the ongoing reliance of liberals on racial issues as they are experienced in the US in discussing these issues. The complex linguistic-behavioural attitude encompassed by the expression 'politically correct' became widely discussed in the US during the 1980s and the 1990s in connection with the end of the Soviet system and the formation of a globalised capitalist world.⁶ However, the political root of this form of challenge and protest may have a deeper history that we can relate to an individualist approach to politics.⁷

The American philosopher Michael Sandel attributed the radicalisation of this individualist approach to the isolation of persons from a power that becomes more and more technocratic. He traced it back to the breakdown of the genuinely social character of politics that occurred with Roosevelt's New Deal. According to Sandel, Roosevelt had to decide whether to accept the social-democratic reforms proposed by the left of his party or the libertarian impulses of Republican capitalism. In the end, he found a third way: relying on an interpretation of economics as a mathematical science, following Keynes, thus separating the 'technical' truth of economics from ethics (a discipline that economics was previously considered to be part of) and political choices (Sandel 1996). The idea of neutrality was born. When the major economic and social issues are removed from the political domain, what remains is the important but necessarily partial battle over ethical and linguistic issues detached from the possibility of more systematic reform. In another cultural area, the Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce related the growing liberal landscape of the 1970s to the philosophical roots of freedom conceived as part of an individualist framework. According to Del Noce, the long story of materialism inevitably ended with the embracing of capitalist hedonism, transforming social battles into a radicalisation of individual autonomy, leaving individuals alone against the power of the state and supra-state formations. The reasoning is that once deprived of a transcendent reference and of the possibility of changing the necessary path of history, humans tend to radicalise the principle of autonomy more and more, fighting not for social but for individual rights. In this sense, Del Noce foresaw the transformation of left-wing parties into radical mass parties—libertarian, individualistic and narcissistic (Del Noce 1978).

Following these suggestions, we can say that political correctness becomes problematic when decisions about the proper structure of society are removed from the possibility of criticism because of the extreme disintermediation of our societies: everyone counts on himself or herself as social relationships weaken. In this social climate, individual vulnerabilities and defences risk becoming insurmountable walls that prevent the flourishing of human relations.

The religious root

All forms of moral radicalisation also depend on the nature of religious culture. It is no coincidence that, in its most extreme forms, political correctness arises in countries with a strong Calvinist tradition. It is impossible to understand the US, and not only regarding this issue, without being fully aware of the power of the Calvinism that was imported by the Pilgrim Fathers. Calvinism has the potential to become a kind of moral radicalisation

that is unknown to most other Reformed Churches and impossible in the Catholic context. Moral uprightness in general, and ethical coherence in particular, are decisive features of Calvinist theology because they reflect a personal relationship with a severe God, whose choices remain utterly mysterious and whose decrees must be precisely and literally executed at all costs, as salvation depends on them. Unlike in countries with a Catholic heritage, politics remains tied to religion because divine decrees must find a practical and civil embodiment that is conceived with equal consistency. It may seem strange to be discussing these issues in the first half of the twenty-first century, but the history of secularisation in the US is very different from that of Europe. Even in the first half of the nineteenth century, all of the universities in the US were firmly religious, and to this day, religiosity remains a significant dimension of the American cultural environment (Kuklich 2002). This means that even those who now live far from religious dictates tend to experience ethical–civil battles passionately, motivated by religious attachment, which provides political radicalisation with an ethical and emotional impetus that would otherwise be impossible.⁸

The philosophical root

A more properly philosophical root of Politically Correct 4.0 (PC 4.0) is found in nominalism, which underlies much of postmodern culture. Nominalism has a long history dating back to medieval thought and has existed in several variations. It can be summarised by stating that it believes in a separation of things from the words used to name and describe them, as well as from the meaning of the things themselves. Depending on the version of nominalism, meaning can be judged to be non-existent or constructed solely from the experience of things, or, as in the current cultural climate, generated by the names we invent for or attribute to them. In contrast, realism believes in a close and consequential connection between meanings, things and names, so that names depend on things, which in turn depend on their meanings. The nominalist division between meanings, things and names that runs through the entirety of philosophy from the end of the classical era manifests itself in PC 4.0 as a belief that changing or contesting names and attitudes can change the meanings of things. By using more feminine words in Latin-based languages, we will reach a better gender balance. By avoiding certain words referring to minorities, we will be more fair, equal and inclusive towards them. The bad social attitudes (things) with their bad ideological roots, such as discrimination and racism (meaning), will change if we criticise and change our ways of naming them. This is a philosophical attitude known as deconstruction in its critical version, which was often borrowed from French philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century, and as social or radical constructivism in its positive version, especially in sociological contexts (Maddalena and Gili 2017, 2021; Ferraris 2017; Lo Russo 2018). The philosophical reaction to the Holodomor, the two wars (increasingly seen as a unified phenomenon), the Holocaust and the twentieth-century totalitarianisms was a rejection of the close connection between reality and truth, in search of forms of knowledge and language that prevented violence perpetrated in the name of absolute ‘truths’ and of what is presumed to be a truthful representation of reality. This unexpectedly led to a radical critique and suspicion of reason and of its

ability to achieve shared and universal truths. We had several decades of following this postmodernist cultural fashion, which held that reason cannot grasp reality because there are no facts to which we can refer, but only narratives and interpretations. This has led to a serious questioning of the possibility of any objective meaning, even to the point of suggesting that all interpretations can be equally valid. From the extreme relativism with nihilistic tendencies that was typical of the late twentieth century, we have now shifted to a stiffening of nominalist constructions, leading to a paradoxically opposite result. Because of the heterogenesis of ends, the ‘anything goes’ of the late twentieth century has transformed into the current dictates of political correctness that prohibit any deviation from the only stylistic and behavioural norms accepted by the intellectual majority of Western society. The paradox is that those who continued to define themselves as realists first found themselves defending the solidity of references to reality and its meanings against the Nietzschean-derived nominalist mantra that ‘there are no facts, only interpretations’ and now find themselves defending the possibility that there are different interpretations of reality against the nominalist mantra that prohibits names or attitudes not deemed inclusive by the majority of society.

How to handle the new cultural wave without rejecting its insights

Escaping the ideology of PC 4.0 does not mean denying its demands for justice. A mere rejection of these demands is just as ideological and useless as PC 4.0, and would result in an internal conflict within Western civilisation. Instead, is crucial to rediscover appropriate cures for each of the identified roots. Therefore, in reverse order with respect to the previous discussion, it is necessary to rediscover anti-nominalist realism, a sense of fallibilism and the need to sustain intermediate institutions. Each of these responses must be elaborated on their merit and not just declared by fiat.

The proper philosophical response is thus a rich and relational realism that considers the changes that occur in reality and to meanings, accepting an actual deepening of these changes and rejecting whatever lacks real reference to reality (Maddalena and Gili 2022). For example, in the linguistic field, the declaration of the Italian Academy of the Crusca, the referee of all linguistic issues in Italy, was of great help (Accademia della Crusca 2023). When questioned about the linguistic changes requested by PC 4.0, it responded by delving into the specific terms. In doing so, it was able to reject as contrary to proper Italian the addition of an asterisk or schwa as a neutral plural ending (*car* collegh**; *Carə colleghə*) because Italian needs every letter to be read. It also rejected the repetition of terms in the feminine plural (*candidati* and *candidate*), recalling that in Italian the neutral plural coincides with the masculine (*candidati*) without implying any gender judgement. It accepted the feminisation of terms ending in *-o* and *-a* (*sindaca, ministra*, etc.). The attitude of the Italian Academy should also be applied to other issues, including the construction of statues and the propriety of historical actions, by examining case by case, within the hermeneutics of their eras, which historical events are worthy of revision. In the West, for example, we believe that Hitler and Mussolini should not be honoured with statues because they are reprehensible even within an understanding of the

meanings of the time, while in-depth historical discussion would allow the recovery of statues of Christopher Columbus and of the texts of the ‘sexist’ Homer. The suggestion is that we engage specific topics, studying reality in all its dimensions.

The proper response to the religious aspect of this culture of political correctness cannot be a lack of interest or of civic and political passion, or an ode to indifference. The cure is to recall, and educate ourselves about, our intrinsic fallibility. In the strands of Christian religion in all of its versions, as well as in Judaism, we find the memory of original sin. Moreover, contemporary philosophy of science has long embraced the idea of the intrinsic fallibilism of our knowledge, as highlighted by Charles S. Peirce (CP 8, 5–5.1; CP 1, 13–14) and later, with a different emphasis, by Karl Popper (1959). Science itself, following Heisenberg, has long understood that it cannot be entirely deterministic. Therefore, there are good reasons to educate ourselves to understand that humans are always fallible; this does not demonstrate an absence of truth—by which we measure error—but confirms the inevitable approximation of every human achievement. Educating ourselves about this fallibilism allows us to temper Calvinist moralism and the rigidity of youth that sustain PC 4.0.

Finally, from a political perspective, it is crucial to emphasise the importance of a world where politics is again part of a comprehensive human project and not simply entrusted to technicians. Practical solutions that arise from this concern mainly involve projects of new intermediation capable of removing the individualistic and disintermediated aspect of present-day politics, which condemns citizens to face technical choices powerless and alone, seemingly without the possibility of reply. Creating and favouring intermediate institutions such as parties, associations, consortia, groups, committees and unions allows the re-creation of a social network that confronts technical power in a cooperative manner, providing alternative solutions or showing the impossibility or effectiveness of certain measures taken. It is in defence of these institutions that the profound ideas of subsidiarity would be implemented, ideas that must apply to every society and especially to the interstate dynamics of Europe. Only in this resurgence of associative and community life can realism live in a rich and relational way, listening to and supporting demands for greater social justice without falling into the moral Jacobinism that transforms justice into terror.

Notes

1. The ambiguity of an overly broad use of the expression ‘political correctness’ is evident in the Munk debate on the topic reported in Fry et al. 2018.
2. I use this label to distinguish today’s debate, which is related to the Internet 4.0—the Internet of Things—from the initial versions of political correctness that developed after the Second World War, the one that emerged during the 1970s, and its revival in the 1980s and 1990s.
3. For the pioneering studies on this phenomenon, see Dalton 1987, and for a review of contemporary studies of the influence of social media on it see Kubin and von Sikorski 2021.
4. For a similar, but more critical, classification, see Mastrocola and Ricolfi 2023 and Friedman 2019. See also Soncini 2021. If we could escape the linguistic realm, we would find at least one other need and critically responsive attitude: (6) the acknowledgement that the majority

is not always right, countered by (6) positive actions taken to balance the injustices suffered by minorities.

5. 'One of the earliest uses of the term "politically correct" in the sense in which we currently understand it – dogmatic language boundaries aimed at conforming to a political belief – is found in a New York Times article from 1934. The title of the article makes its subject obvious: "Personal liberty vanishes in Reich"' (Bump 2015).
6. For a brief but detailed account of this story, especially of the use of the expression in the US media, see Bump (2015).
7. See again the Munk debate reported in Fry et al. 2018. Both defendants and critics of political correctness play on an individualist rhetoric.
8. The relevance of Calvinism to American society was classically outlined by Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber 1930). Recent studies on this subject are Bratt 2009 and Hart 2013.

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