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political correctness

History and Definition

The term “politically correct” appears to have originally been used in leftist circles either approvingly to refer to someone who correctly adheres to the party line, or more often ironically and disapprovingly to someone whose adherence to the Communist Party line was excessive, tiresome, and beyond good sense. Confessions of being politically incorrect might also be used self-deprecatingly to refer to one’s own backsliding.

In the mid- to late-1980s, neoconservative scholars, many of whom were members of the National Association of Scholars, began to use “political correctness” as a term of disparagement for a variety of curriculum transformation projects. Women’s studies programs, ethnic studies programs, and curriculum revisions designed to make college courses, especially in literature and history, more multicultural were charged with being part of a new wave of political correctness on college and university campuses. In 1989, Stanford University made a much publicized revision in its core Western Civilization courses to de-emphasize the West and to include

women and racial minorities. Major universities like Stanford, the University of Michigan, and the University of Wisconsin instituted speech codes aimed at controlling hate speech. The political correctness debates (also referred to as the culture wars) subsequently took off in 1990 and 1991 in a series of articles in *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, the *New York Times*, *Time*, the *Village Voice*, and *Atlantic Monthly* about the new political correctness on campuses. In May 1991, President George Bush delivered his commencement address at the University of Michigan on the dangers of political correctness. Since then, “politically correct” has come to be used to characterize curriculum revisions, campus speech codes, harassment policies, affirmative action in college admissions and hiring, the use of new descriptors for minorities (e.g., African American, Native American, learning disabled), new NORMS for interacting with women and racial or cultural minorities (e.g., avoiding genteel “ladies first” policies), and generally, to any change in language, policy, social behavior, and cultural representation that is aimed at avoiding or correcting a narrowly Eurocentric world view and the long-standing subordination of some social groups. Originating in debates over the content of higher education, the terms “politically correct” or “PC” are now routinely used outside of the academy.

The current political correctness debates were preceded by a set of social (or identity politics) movements, legislative initiatives, and theoretical developments that motivated members of the academy to become mindful of the politics of education. The Civil Rights movement of the 1960s that was followed by the women’s rights movement, gay and lesbian liberation movement, animal liberation movement, and public attention to the culturally disesteemed status of Native Americans, various ethnic minorities, and the physically and mentally disabled all had substantial cultural and legal impacts that in turn affected the academy. Cumulatively, these movements have underscored the significance of the feminist slogan “the personal is political.” That is, areas of social life that were conventionally taken to be apolitical, such as everyday language, the canon of literary classics, jokes, advertising, norms of politeness, hiring decisions, and sports funding, came increasingly to be seen as potential sites for enacting racism, sexism, and Eurocentrism. Attention to the politics of traditional university curricula was a nat-

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ural outgrowth of this expanded sense of the political. These social movements also issued in a set of legal initiatives that significantly affected educational policy, most notably, the desegregation of education mandated in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954), Title IV of the Civil Rights Act (1964) that prohibited DISCRIMINATION against members of “suspect categories,” and Title IX of the Educational Amendments (1972) that prohibited sex discrimination in education. Finally, the rise of POST-MODERNISM and deconstructionism, particularly in literature departments, provided the theoretical apparatus for analyzing the politics of claims to truth and objectivity and for investigating the role that scholarship plays in the social construction of reality. Critics of foundationalist epistemology argued that knowledge is perspectival and historically and culturally situated. More importantly, it was argued that the sciences, social sciences, and humanities have historically excluded the perspectives of nonwestern, nonwhite and nonmale people, have used biased standards for what counts as good scholarship, and have produced theories and “factual” narratives distorted by the cultural ideologies that sustain dominance systems. If truth claims themselves can serve a political function, the academy could not claim to be politically neutral simply because it was devoted to the pursuit of truth.

“Politically correct” now carries a complex set of meanings. To describe an academic program, a bit of social behavior, or a new descriptor (*e.g.*, “chair” rather than “chairman”) as politically *correct* is to imply that while it correctly conforms to a liberal academic party line, it is incorrect by some other more important or more substantive measure; it is educationally unsound, unjust, an illegitimate interference with free speech, or simply unnecessary or silly. “Politically correct” also implies the presence of a sufficient power base to enforce compliance with whatever is politically correct, either through formal penalties or informal disapproval and shunning. That is, it implies the presence of political correctors and the threat of being corrected. As a result, political correctness is implicitly linked with authoritarianism, COERCION, CENSORSHIP, and the bad taste to correct others’ manners.

To describe an academic program, a bit of social behavior, or a new descriptor as *politically* correct is to imply that political goals have wrongly been

given precedence over other goals. For instance, women’s studies and African American studies programs have been described as prioritizing political aims at the expense of educational ones. The term “politically correct,” partly in virtue of its historical association with the Communist Party, also implies that democratic liberties are being interfered with, most notably free speech and academic freedom. Indeed, political correctness has been equated with “thought police” and a “new McCarthyism.”

Because the term “politically correct” implies dogmatic, illiberal toeing of a party line and because “politically incorrect” implies a refusal to give politics priority, both terms exclude what defenders of curriculum transformation projects, speech codes, antiharassment policies, new social norms, and new descriptors for women and minorities in fact advocate—political thoughtfulness.

Moral Language and Cultural Criticism

Becoming thoughtful about the social construction of culturally disesteemed gender, racial, ethnic, economic, national, sexual, religious, age, and ability identities and the ways in which prejudice and second-class citizenship are socially institutionalized is necessarily a political matter. It is thoughtfulness about the way that POWER—economic, epistemic, cultural, and legal—is sustained for some and denied to others. It is thoughtfulness about what it would take to realize two of our most basic political values: EQUALITY and democratic decision making. From the late 1880s through the 1970s, political thoughtfulness about inequality was heavily devoted to critiquing the *formal* differential treatment of racial minorities and women in law and policy. In academia, that originally meant opening college and university doors to blacks, women, and Jews; and later, enforcing antidiscrimination policies. Although formal RIGHTS are critical to securing equality for disadvantaged social groups, extralegal cultural factors affect individuals’ ability to exercise those rights and have them respected. Extralegal cultural factors also determine whether or not equal rights translate into equally dignified treatment generally, freedom from bias-motivated violence, equal engagement in the production of knowledge and culture, and equal representation in democratic decision making processes. But if inequality is culturally, and not just

legally, institutionalized, political thoughtfulness will involve cultural criticism.

In the 1980s and 1990s, cultural critics within the academy developed a sizable, new, moral language adequate to the task of cultural criticism. Some new terms—that PC critics trivialize as mere “isms”—name morally worrisome systems of domination: for example, racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, and colonialism. Other new terms were meant to replace the older moral language of discrimination and prejudice and to more accurately describe the nature, mechanisms, and effects of institutionalized inequality: OPPRESSION, domination, cultural imperialism, elitism, hate crimes, marginalization, exclusion, silencing, essentializing, treating as the Other. Supplementing the older moral language of rights and liberties, an additional set of MORAL TERMS captured what full scale sociocultural equality would mean or require: sensitivity, diversity, inclusivity, celebrating difference, empowerment, and attention to a plurality of voices.

The terms “politically correct” and “politically incorrect” belong in this new moral, linguistic landscape. Any policy, norm, educational program, or linguistic change whose rationale is statable using this new moral terminology can also be disparaged as mere political correctness. Because “political correctness” refers to educational, linguistic, and behavioral reforms based on an antidomination rationale, being opposed to political correctness generally is not clearly distinct from being opposed to critiques of and interventions in dominance systems. Were it not for the fact that “political correctness” carries negative implications (for example, of being against academic freedom), it would be more obvious that care needs to be taken in expressing opposition to political correctness to explain how that opposition does not entail being pro racism, sexism, classism, and so on.

Although the term “political correctness” has unfortunately been used to dismiss politically thoughtful educational reforms without suggesting alternative means for remedying structural inequalities or for ensuring that scholarship does not perpetuate cultural ideologies, a term like “political correctness” is a useful, perhaps essential, part of our moral vocabulary. As JOHN STUART MILL (1806–1873) noted over a century ago, any belief no matter how admirable may be held merely as a dead dogma. In

addition, it is tempting when faced with political problems as complex and intransigent as racism to focus on quick, easy fixes like a mere change in vocabulary. And even the best political movements attract moral snobs who prize the signs of moral superiority and the AUTHORITY to correct. Carefully used to refer only to a kind of intellectual and moral vice, rather than to dismiss an antidominance viewpoint, “political correctness” could, like “snobbery” and “dogmatism,” function as a term of appropriate moral critique.

Liberal Tensions

The PC debates within academia, like larger social debates about affirmative action, sexual harassment policies, the regulation of PORNOGRAPHY, the meaning of equal opportunity, and welfare and bilingual policies, are fueled by long-standing tensions and unclarities within liberal political theorizing. Equality and LIBERTY are both central liberal values. The meaning of both terms is contested. Attempting to improve the campus climate for members of subordinate groups in the name of liberty may conflict with attempts to maximize liberty from legal and quasi-legal restrictions on individual behavior and self-expression. Attempting to promote equal representation of minorities and women on faculties and in curricula may conflict with the equal consideration of all meritorious candidates and equal distribution of resources to all academic programs. It may also be the case that under conditions of institutionalized oppression, tradeoffs between equality and liberty will be unavoidable, and thus so too will be disputes over which value should be given priority in any individual case.

Liberalism’s long-standing invocation of the harm principle to justify restrictions on liberty, including free speech, has provoked equally long-standing controversies about what constitutes harm. Must hate speech satisfy the “fighting words” doctrine articulated in *Chaplinsky v. New Hampshire* (1942), or qualify as harassment by being addressed to an individual or a captive audience, like students in a classroom, to be considered harmful? Or do hateful, demeaning, and trivializing images and language in graffiti, newspaper ads, and editorials constitute a harm, even though not directed at a particular individual, because of their chilling effect on campus

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climate, undermining of esteem, and contribution to institutionalized domination?

The distinction between the right and the good, between what is a matter for political decision-making and what is a matter of individual choice, is central to LIBERALISM. How that line is to be drawn in practice, however, is often a matter of dispute. Domestic violence has, for instance, shifted from being a private familial issue to a concern of the law. Much of the PC debate has been about where to draw the line between freedom of expression and academic freedom on the one hand and what colleges and universities are obligated to provide as a matter of educational responsibility and minority student entitlement on the other.

Finally, what it means to have a liberal education is contestable. Traditionally, a liberal education has meant being broadly educated within the standard disciplines and the classics of Western civilization. Contemporary curricular reform, however, is driven by a different vision of liberal education as education for participation in a multicultural, multiracial, egalitarian nation in a multinational world. It is also driven by a different interpretation of how educational institutions have functioned in the past, namely, not merely as preservers of great works and the custodians of truth, but also as producers of ideology and preservers of an inegalitarian status quo.

See also: ACADEMIC ETHICS; ACADEMIC FREEDOM; AGENCY AND DISABILITY; ANIMALS, TREATMENT OF; AUTHORITY; CENSORSHIP; CIVIL RIGHTS AND CIVIC DUTIES; COERCION; CONSERVATISM; CULTURAL STUDIES; DEMOCRACY; DIGNITY; DISCRIMINATION; EQUALITY; ETIQUETTE; FEMINIST ETHICS; GAY ETHICS; LESBIAN ETHICS; LIBERALISM; MORAL EDUCATION; MULTICULTURALISM; PATERNALISM; PORNOGRAPHY; PUBLIC AND PRIVATE MORALITY; PUBLIC POLICY; RACISM AND RELATED ISSUES; SELF-RESPECT; SEXUAL ABUSE AND HARASSMENT; TOLERATION.

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Cheshire Calhoun

political philosophy

See social and political philosophy.

political systems, evaluation of

Every organized political entity has some way of allocating the RIGHTS to make legally binding decisions. The range runs from an absolute monarchy to the complex division of powers laid out in the U.S. Constitution. Systematic speculation about the best form of polity constitutes a large part of the subject matter of political philosophy. Most political philosophers have recommended some particular form of political organization, if not for all times and places then at any rate for their own society and others sufficiently like it. We shall be concerned here with the recurrent forms of argument that are put forward in order to advance the claims of certain political institutions over those of others. The object will be to construct an exhaustive classification of types of justification. This is represented as a tree diagram: