

# THE PARADOXES OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

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## Abstract

This paper will try to answer some of the main questions regarding political correctness and it will present some of the many paradoxes of this controversial phenomenon. The more political correctness tries to correct the social inequalities, the more inequalities it creates, the more it tries to put an end to conflicts, the more conflicts it generates, the more inclusive it claims to be, the more it excludes those who oppose it, the more progressive it wants to be, the less progress it brings about.

**Keywords:** political correctness, discourse intention and perception, freedom of speech, the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, the euphemism treadmill, social equality, substantive equality, racial quotas, multiculturalism

## 1. INTRODUCTION

I first came across the term “political correctness” over ten years ago, when I happened to read an article written by Horia Roman Patapievici, entitled “The American Communism” (which, I later discovered, was in fact a chapter from one of his books). I found it fascinating and I started to look for other articles, books and debates that might help me get a better understanding of this phenomenon. The more I read, the more questions I had and they all seemed to point to new paradoxes. The main objective of this paper is to present these paradoxes while trying to answer some of the main questions regarding political correctness.

## 2. THE PARADOXES

I believe that before beginning to discuss a matter as complex and as controversial as political correctness, one must first have an understanding of what this phenomenon is and more importantly, what it does. According to the Oxford Dictionary, political correctness is “the avoidance of terms and behaviour considered to be discriminatory or offensive to certain groups of people” (Oxford Dictionary, 2001: 990). The online Lexico Dictionary (powered by Oxford) defines it as “the avoidance of forms of expression or action that are perceived to exclude, marginalize, or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against.” The online Cambridge Dictionary considers it to be “the act of avoiding language and actions that could be offensive to others, especially those relating to sex and race”, while the online Merriam Webster Dictionary defines being politically correct as “conforming to a belief

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that language and practices which could offend political sensibilities (as in matters of sex or race) should be eliminated". There are many other definitions which I believe to be just as problematic as the ones I have mentioned above. First of all, the use of the passive forms ("considered", "perceived") and the absence of the logical subject raise the following question: Who decides what is offensive?

If we take a look at what is happening in society nowadays, the answer seems to be the offended party, which leads to another question: Is the intention of a discourse always equal to its perception? Taking into account polysemy and lexical ambiguity as well as different psychological and sociological factors, the answer is: not always. The use of the modal verb "could" in two of the definitions above also supports this point of view. There are people who are oversensitive and they may feel offended even if the speaker had no intention of insulting them and the opposite is possible as well: somebody can insult someone else in such a subtle way that the listener may not even be aware of it. Just because a term is offensive in a certain context does not mean it is offensive in all contexts and just because someone uses it in an insulting way does not mean that everybody uses it in the same way all the time. There are three paradoxes of perceiving offence without taking into account the speaker's intention. First of all, this allows every discourse to be full of imagined implications and it perpetuates a cult of victimization, by encouraging people to view themselves as oppressed. Secondly, it is directed against the literate people, the ones who understand the nuanced meanings of words and who use them correctly. Thirdly, this kind of attitude is discriminatory on account of giving the offended party the sole right to define what words mean.

Moreover, the words (and behaviour) which should be avoided (or banned) often refer to certain minority groups as if offense were somehow limited to a certain (race, gender, disabled) category. The paradox lies in the fact that this kind of approach only accentuates the dichotomy between the oppressors and the oppressed by perpetuating a negative image of both the majority (who always seems to be up to no good and ready to offend) and the minorities (who always seem to need protection). This leads to the following question: Should people have the right not to be offended?

Before addressing this question, I would like to make a clear distinction between political correctness and politeness. I am not referring to those situations when certain individuals are simply rude and offend gratuitously, but to those instances when people have different opinions, which might accidentally offend their interlocutors. The obvious problem with this kind of attitude is that it does not allow any kind of criticism on account of it being potentially offensive. John Stuart Mill considered freedom of speech to be essential, even when people expressed opinions that were wrong and he brought four arguments to this effect:

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“First, if any opinion is compelled to silence, that opinion may, for aught we can certainly know, be true. To deny this is to assume our own infallibility. Secondly, though the silenced opinion be an error, it may, and very commonly does, contain a portion of truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions, that the remainder of the truth has any chance of being supplied. Thirdly, even if the received opinion be not only true, but the whole truth; unless it is suffered to be, and actually is, vigorously and earnestly contested, it will, by most of those who receive it, be held in the manner of a prejudice, with little comprehension or feeling of its rational grounds. And not only this, but, fourthly, the meaning of the doctrine itself will be in danger of being lost, or enfeebled, and deprived of its vital effect on the character and conduct: the dogma becoming a mere formal profession, inefficacious for good, but cumbering the ground, and preventing the growth of any real and heartfelt conviction, from reason or personal experience.” (Mill, 1859: 50)

The paradox in this case lies in the fact that, by censoring speech on account of it being potentially offensive, political correctness is anything but progressive, because progress cannot take place in the absence of confrontations, conflict and debate.

Supporters of political correctness insist that it is a civilizing influence on our society which is in need of transformation and that, in order for that to happen, people need to change the way they think, which starts with the way they speak. This raises the next question: Can words change the way people think?

According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, developed by Edward Sapir and his disciple, B.L. Whorf, “we dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds - and this means largely by the linguistic systems in our minds” (Whorf, 1940: 213). In other words, it is easier for people to think things for which there are terms in the languages they speak or, according to one version of the same hypothesis, it is impossible to think things for which there are no terms in the languages we speak. Those who support this theory believe that, by eliminating certain words from the vocabulary, discriminatory and offensive attitudes will disappear as well. This idea is far from being original. Totalitarian propaganda tried to change the way in which people thought by modifying their language. In his novel, “Nineteen eighty-four”, George Orwell uses this idea, the purpose of Newspeak being that of making impossible any other way of thinking except the one approved by the party. There were several means by which Newspeak did that: the elimination of all unwanted words, the elimination of unwanted meanings (words with negative meanings were replaced with words formed by derivation with prefixes. Thus, the word “bad” was replaced with “ungood”), the exaggeration of positive meanings

through derivation with prefixes (“doubleplusgood”), forming new words by composition and abbreviation (Minitrue, Minipax, Miniluv, Miniplenty) and the use of euphemisms as a way of concealing the truth.

Steven Pinker explains how replacing words is a cyclical process which creates a “euphemism treadmill” (Pinker, 1994, 1995, 2003). A neutral term (orthophemism) slowly acquires negative connotations and becomes offensive (dysphemism), it is replaced with a politically correct term (euphemism), which slowly assimilates the meanings of the previous term. The problem is never solved because the offensive meanings keep re-emerging and the number of insulting words increases. The paradox lies in the fact that those who actually want to offend have a wider range of words to choose from. “We will know we have achieved equality and mutual respect when names for minorities stay put.” (Pinker, 1994)

The creation of a new, politically correct term does not change reality or the social dynamics, it does not make people equal, which leads to the next question: Is social equality possible and if so, at what cost?

The idea of equality has been on people’s minds since the beginning of times and many have come up with various religious or philosophical arguments to support it. The problem is people are different: we have distinct physical features, various abilities and our interests and our way of thinking may not coincide. Therefore, social equality cannot be built on the idea that all individuals are identical but on the one that they should have equal rights. The values of the French Revolution (Liberté! Egalité! Fraternité) have remained essential in all democratic societies. However, all these three concepts are highly elastic and have no boundaries, no rules of limitation.

The paradox of equality is that the higher it gets, the lower the level of freedom becomes. This was noticed by Alexis de Tocqueville, who also believed the ratio between the two determined the type of society. (Tocqueville, 1840) History has proven how ahead of his time he truly was. Egalitarian societies such as the socialist or the communist one are characterized by uniformity and very little freedom. People who have lived in communism remember how limited certain liberties used to be (such as the freedom to travel abroad or the freedom of speech). On the other hand, people wore the same kind of clothes, they drove the same brand of car, they bought the same kind of products from the stores, etc. There was an equality of result: there were no differences between the intelligent and the stupid or between the educated and the illiterate. There could be no meritocracy because that would have contradicted the principle of equality. The other scenario is possible as well: a lot of freedom and too little equality; such a society is characterized by a high level of crime (because of impunity) and of poverty. In conclusion too much equality leads to totalitarianism and too much freedom leads to anarchy. (Patapievici, 2020) Therefore, we should never strive for absolute equality or absolute freedom, but for a balanced coexistence of the two.

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I have mentioned above the equality of result. The next question is: What is the equality of result and what are its consequences?

In 1965 the term “substantive equality” started to be used in America, after the legislation had changed and the racial segregation had been abolished. The African-American community demanded the substantive equality/ equality of result/ outcome, their argument being that, although they had obtained the same rights as everybody else, their social condition limited their opportunities. U.C. Berkeley introduced the racial quotas in their admission process in order to give the minorities access to better education, but this measure had the opposite effect. (Bloom, 1988; Kimball, 1990; D’Souza, 1991) First of all, the percentage of Asians who wanted to study there was higher than that of any other ethnic group, which led to a paradox: Asian students had to have much better results than any other category (including white students) in order to be admitted. On the other hand, African-American and Hispanic students were allowed with less good results. Secondly, many of the African-American and Hispanic students either dropped out at some point because they couldn’t keep up with the high expectations and the level of difficulty or stayed on but felt that they were treated like second class students (and later like second class graduates), because they hadn’t been admitted on merit. In conclusion, the introduction of the racial quotas did not put an end to discrimination; it only made it worse.

Another term which became popular in America at the same time as that of “substantive equality” was “multiculturalism”, which leads me to the following question: What is multiculturalism and what are its consequences?

America has never been anything but multicultural and has often been called “the melting pot”, i.e. a homogenous society made up of all the different cultures coexisting on American soil. However, supporters of multiculturalism argued that it was not so, that these different cultures should never be mixed. (Bloom, 1988; Kimball, 1990; D’Souza, 1991) One of the paradoxes of multiculturalism lies in the fact that it does not bring people together; it separates them because it rejects the idea of universal human values which can transcend a particular race, class or gender. Moreover, multiculturalism seems to completely ignore the fact that most of the other cultures are not as liberated as the Western one. In fact, many of them condemn Western values (social equality, feminism or gay rights) and still have practices such as: stoning, wife burning or even genital mutilation.

Having tried to answer all these questions and present all the paradoxes of political correctness, I was faced with a big dilemma: How can political correctness and political incorrectness coexist?

François Guizot argued that what made European civilization great and different from all the others was the pluralism of ideas and the fact that not a single one was allowed to become dominant. (Guizot, 1851)

In a democratic society different opinions and ideologies always find a peaceful way of coexisting. However, political correctness does not accept that somebody can be politically incorrect. Therein lies another paradox: the policy of inclusion will exclude anyone who has a different point of view. I do not mean to suggest that people's lives might be in danger or that physically violent measures are taken against them, but there is a kind of social repression following political incorrectness. People are no longer picked up from their homes and shoved into black vans in the middle of the night, the way they used to be in the 1950s, but the PC activists are very good at labelling them and at starting a scandal that could bring about the end of their career. (Voinescu, 2019)

Supporters of political correctness argue that their cause is a moral one and that they are trying to correct the social inequality in our society, to protect those who have been overlooked or discriminated against. Karl R. Popper argued that persecutions carried out in the name of moral causes are just as bad as those carried out in the name of terrible ones. "We may learn a lesson from the terrors of the French Revolution, a lesson which cannot be repeated too often: that fanaticism is always evil and incompatible with the aim of a pluralist society, and that it is our duty to oppose it in any form – even when its aims, though fanatically pursued, are in themselves ethically unobjectionable, and still more so when its aims coincide with our own personal aims. The dangers of fanaticism, and our duty to oppose it under all circumstances, are two of the most important lessons we can learn from history." (Popper, 1984:146)

### **3. CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, the more political correctness tries to correct the social inequalities, the more inequalities it creates, the more it tries to put an end to conflicts, the more conflicts it generates, the more inclusive it claims to be, the more it excludes those who oppose it, the more progressive it wants to be, the less progress it brings about.

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