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“Political Correctness” – A Threat to Free Speech? Overcoming the Dilemma

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Abstract. The concept of Political Correctness (PC) arose in the United States in the 1970s. For the past 30 years, it has been subject to criticism as constituting a threat to the “liberty of speech”, as well as a contribution to media bias. The dilemma of PC lies in the fact that, although it aims to protect human and civic rights, it may also result in the exact opposite, namely the diminishing of such rights as the free utterance of thoughts.

However, civilised societies are in need of strategies to deal with phenomena such as racism, sexism, hate speech, online firestorms and social media shaming, thus making it impossible to completely abandon any form of PC.

This paper examines several ways in which the dilemma of PC endangering free speech can be overcome and new models of the concept found that are suitable for responding to modern challenges in communication and language usage.

Keywords: Political Correctness, Liberty of Speech, Hate Speech, Fake News

1 Introduction

The concept of Political Correctness (PC) arose, in its modern sense, in the United States in the 1970s. For the past 30 years, it has been subject to criticism as constituting a threat to the “liberty of speech”, as well as a contribution to media bias. The dilemma of PC lies in the fact that, although it aims to protect minority rights and encourage discriminated groups to fight for their cause, it may also result in the exact opposite, namely the diminishing of such civic rights as the free utterance of thoughts.

In recent times, speech codes, “safe space”, “trigger warning” and “no platform” policies at British and American universities have further nourished this criticism. On his visit to Howard University in May 2017, in a commencement address to thousands of mostly black graduates, then-president Barack Obama warned of excluding speakers with controversial opinions: *“There’s been a trend around the country of trying to get colleges to disinvite speakers with a different point of view or disrupt a politician’s rally... Don’t do that, no matter how ridiculous or offensive you might find the things that come out of their mouths. Because as my grandmother used to tell me, every time a fool speaks, they’re just advertising their own ignorance.”* [1] As the first US college to do so, in 2016 the University of Chicago abolished “trigger warnings”, “no platform” policies and intellectual “safe spaces”, which aim to “protect” people from disturbing ideas, and encouraged their students *“to speak, write, listen, challenge and learn without fear of censorship”* [2]. The American Association of University Professors even stated that *“the presumption that students need to be protected rather than challenged in a classroom is at once infantilizing and anti-intellectual”* [3].

In 2016, the “Economist” claimed that in many countries of the world the free utterance of thoughts is being suppressed under the pretence of allegedly banning hate speech [4] [5].

However, civilised societies are in need of strategies to deal with phenomena such as racism, sexism, harassment, hate speech, online firestorms and social media shaming, thus making it impossible to completely abandon any form of PC. This paper examines several ways in which the dilemma of PC endangering free speech can be overcome and new models of the concept found that are suitable for responding to modern challenges in communication and language usage¹.

¹ In a previous paper, the author recommended that the discussion of PC be treated separately from the ideological battle between the political right and left, the topic itself being of more general and global importance [6]. Hence, the following considerations address all readers, regardless of their political beliefs and background.

2 Overcoming the Dilemma

2.1 Avoiding Authoritarian, “Top Down” Attitudes

Firstly, it would be desirable to abandon the authoritarian, “top down” attitude that has been assumed by many of PC’s advocates. As Legault et al. (2011) have proved, it is counterproductive to try to force people to obey PC rules, as they will strongly oppose this attempt and respond exactly to the contrary: “... *strategies urging people to comply with antiprejudice standards are worse than doing nothing at all... Promotion of autonomous prejudice regulation... is clearly more beneficial than social pressure for political correctness.*” [7, 1476] Therefore, in order to create new models of PC in which the freedom of speech is respected, it will prove useful to refrain from moral accusations or obligatory speech codes, and instead encourage individuals to themselves reflect upon their attitudes and language usage. In all cases, the liberty of uttering one’s own thoughts must, of course, have legal limits where insults, defamation, harassment or humiliation of individuals or groups of persons are involved².

In this context, it might also be advisable to rename PC so that the current, somewhat negatively connotated, concept can be avoided. “Social fairness”, “fair use of language” or “common decency” could be fitting substitutes for an expression that has rightly been criticised as misinterpreting the idea that it embodies.

2.2 Focusing on Content, rather than on Words and Expressions

In recent decades, numerous battles have been fought over the “politically correct” denomination of minorities, marginalised groups and other “challenged” referents. To make matters worse, the “euphemistic” expressions suggested by the PC movement tend to lose their positive connotation over time and are then frequently replaced by new words, as is, in the English language, the case with terms like “handicapped”, which was substituted by “disabled” and, subsequently, renamed “challenged” [10, 190]. This phenomenon was observed, and named “euphemism treadmill”, by the cognitive scientist Steven Pinker: “*The euphemism treadmill shows that concepts, not words, are primary in people’s minds. Give a concept a new name, and the name becomes colored by the concept; the concept does not become freshened by the name,*

² See under 2.4. Cf also Article 10 of the European Convention on Human Rights, which holds that the right to freedom of expression “may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society [...] for the protection of the reputation or rights of others [...]” [8, Art. 10]. The European Court of Human Rights, in its judgment in the case of *Handyside v. The United Kingdom*, of 7 Dec 1976, states that “[freedom of expression] is applicable not only to ‘information’ or ‘ideas’ that are favourably received or regarded as inoffensive or as a matter of indifference, but also to those that offend, shock or disturb the State or any sector of the population” [9, para. 49]. The Court, however, also argues that “whoever exercises his freedom of expression undertakes ‘duties and responsibilities’, the scope of which depends on his situation and the technical means he uses” [9, para. 49].

at least not for long. Names for minorities will continue to change as long as people have negative attitudes toward them. We will know that we have achieved mutual respect when the names stay put.” [10, 189]

The problem here is that the traditional concept of PC focusses too strongly on the mere choice of expressions rather than on speakers’ intentions. People who use outdated vocabulary are easily blamed for discrimination, no matter what their real intention might be. Thus, non-PC language is often confused with real hatred and lack of respect. In a guidebook on politically correct language usage, recently published in Germany by the editors of the renowned Duden dictionary, the use of the so-called “generic masculine” – a phenomenon common to German and a few other languages – is mentioned in the same breath as hate speech in social media, as well as sexist and racist remarks: “... *diskriminierender und herabwürdigender Sprachgebrauch ist Teil unserer Gesellschaft und hat viele Facetten*” (“... *the discriminatory and humiliating use of language is part of our society and has many aspects*”). [11, blurb].

However, language patterns like the generic masculine, which are inherent to the *langue*, i.e. the structural system of a language, differ considerably from deprecatory remarks on women or their factual discrimination, such as unequal payment. Equalising non-PC language usage with defamation and humiliation means criminalising people who may simply not be up to date with the latest requirements as defined by PC or are not willing to obediently fulfil them.³

Secondly, a distinction should therefore be made between speakers’ intentions and concepts and the vocabulary they actually use, whereby the emphasis is placed on content rather than on formal criteria. Thus, not criminalising people for their use of language would be a further step towards a form of PC that encourages, rather than inhibits, free speech.

2.3 Clarifying the “Mandates”

In its April 2013 edition, a Viennese periodical, written by and for young migrants, used the word “Mischlinge” (“mixed-bloods”) in the front page’s headline [12]. Subsequently, criticism arose in other media that a racist expression had been utilised. The author responded by stating that she herself was “mixed-blood” and had no intention of calling herself otherwise, and that among the many letters to the editor received on the topic, there had not been a single complaint that came from a person from the relevant group [13].

The attempt to censor persons from challenged groups to speak about themselves in terms of their choice of vocabulary is, indeed, an absurdity. Thirdly, in order to guarantee the free expression of thought, the advocates of PC should not be “more Catholic than the Pope”. On the contrary, the “mandates” should be clarified and the relevant minorities and marginalised groups themselves first asked to define the language and behaviour expected from the majority, rather than leave it to the “elite”,

³ Ironically, reality can be entirely non-PC in cases where the language is “correct”. In 2017, the author of this paper could observe this in a small Austrian town where, during a celebration in the town hall, not a single speaker on the stage was a woman, despite the fact that gender-fair language was used throughout all the speeches and presentation slides.

such as journalists, politicians and academics, to decide on the “correctness” or “incorrectness” of speech.

2.4 Setting Legal Standards

Fourthly, and most importantly, the standards for actions and expressions which may be regarded as offensive and discriminating should, as a further step, be set by democratically elected legislative bodies, and implemented, interpreted and monitored by courts of law. The PC movement itself could thus be more easily liberated from its reputation as the censor and inhibitor of the free utterance of thought and a legal basis created. Since parliaments have defined and granted civic rights such as those of free speech, it is precisely their task to also define their limits and to protect individuals and groups from harassment, defamation, abuse and humiliation. Free speech must confront borders in places where it violates the human dignity or human or civic rights of others. In democratic societies, the relevant public bodies should be aware of their responsibility in this regard to a higher degree than is currently the case, and set legal and reliable “external standards” for PC, rather than leave the decision concerning the “correctness” of language and actions to persons and groups who have no democratic legitimation or mandate.

In 2018, the French parliament took a step in this direction by endorsing a law against sexual and sexist violence [14]. The new act stipulates, *inter alia*, on-the-spot fines for forms of sexual harassment such as indecent gestures, whistling, sexist remarks or intentionally pursuing a person. The French Gender Equality Minister Marlène Schiappa, upon whose initiative the law came into being, called it “*une nouveauté mondiale*” (“*a unique innovation*”), stating that in countries like the neighbouring Belgium women had to report the offence and bring a charge [15]. The *loi Schiappa* also applies to cyber harassment, making sexual or moral harassment punishable with a sentence in gaol.

Assigning the task of dealing with offences and discriminations to legislation and jurisdiction, would, in the United States and Britain, also relieve universities from the responsibility of drawing up and implementing anti-discrimination measures and would enable them to abandon “no platform” as well as “safe space” and “trigger warning” policies⁴.

Last but not least, the battle against social media shaming, online firestorms and cyber harassment could be won if legislative bodies defined appropriate punishment for these offences and, likewise, forced social media providers to rigidly control their content. Some of the latter seem, up to now, to have been more concerned about

⁴ Lukianoff and Haidt have rightly pointed out that in the USA “*the federal government... should release universities from their fear of unreasonable investigation and sanctions by the Department of Education. Congress should define peer-on-peer harassment according to the Supreme Court’s definition in the 1999 case Davis v. Monroe County Board of Education. The Davis standard holds that a single comment or thoughtless remark by a student does not equal harassment; harassment requires a pattern of objectively offensive behavior by one student that interferes with another student’s access to education. Establishing the Davis standard would help eliminate universities’ impulse to police their students’ speech so carefully.*” [3]

banning nudity than hate speech and fake news from their users' accounts. It appears that, on the whole, the internet still largely lacks control by the legal authorities.

3 Conclusion

The question regarding PC and the limits of free speech will doubtless remain a delicate one. It will be of paramount importance that civilised societies draw an appropriate line between the right to utter one's thoughts and the protection of other people's rights. Above all, the control of online hate speech and disinformation constitutes a major challenge in our digital age, given the fact that the internet abounds with racist and xenophobic remarks and materials published on different sites and platforms.

However, preventing the publication of hate speech will not alter the attitude behind it. The current cyber hatred and firestorms are merely symptoms of the societal conflicts that provide the background. These should be analysed, discussed, and, wherever possible, solved, rather than simply forbidding hate speech.

Among the reasons and sources for many of the "politically incorrect" postings in social media rank the fear of globalisation and loss of national identity, linked with a growing mistrust of liberalism and democracy. It appears that the latter are regarded by a considerable number of voters as no longer capable of solving the problems that the 21st century poses. This scepticism serves to further the rise of authoritarian and non-democratic political power, thus, in the long term, constituting a threat to democracy, and hence to free speech and other civic rights that, so far, have been guaranteed by this system.

It is precisely this, and not the dispute over which formulations are permissible or not in public discourse, that presents the real challenge when confronting PC today.

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