

The Origins of Political Correctness

A lie told often enough becomes the truth.

Vladimir Lenin

Intolerance is as ancient as human belief. Christianity, particularly in eras of religious persecution such as Elizabethan England, has shown many of the characteristics of modern political correctness, and often went far further by enforcing its intolerance with violence (as does Islam in parts of the world today). Darwin became the victim of a Victorian form of political correctness, when he was lampooned and shunned for saying that our ancestors swung from branches.

Intolerance has often applied outside religious issues. Those who challenged existing power structures, such as demanding women's right to vote, in Victorian England, would have been treated in much the same way as those who now break PC taboos.

But the Enlightenment, and advocates of liberty and freedom of thought such as Mill, Locke and Voltaire, started the opening up of the human mind and gradually put an end to 'politically correct' religious beliefs, allowing free and open dissent. During the last century, the human mind has become more open than any previous period, but it is now closing down again.

Modern political correctness is usually thought to have originated at the 'Frankfurt School' in inter-war Germany. William Lind¹ wrote that it started when the Institute for Social Research at Frankfurt University, founded in 1923, started transferring Marxist techniques from economic to cultural and social issues, and adding elements of Freud. One of its founders, George Lukacs, said its purpose was

answering the question: ‘who shall save us from Western civilisation?’ With the rise of Nazi Germany, many of the leading lights of the ‘Frankfurt School’ fled to the US, and their way of thinking rapidly gained influence in the US academia, which has long been the stronghold, and main propagator, of PC.

Political correctness is thought to have gained strength out of disillusion among western communists with the Soviet Union. No longer able to mount a credible challenge to Western capitalism with economic arguments, they transferred their attacks on the West to its culture.

The real growth in influence of political correctness came with the 1960s counter-culture, when the widespread liberal desire to challenge the conservative rules governing society proved a fertile breeding ground for PC ideology. Coleman described PC as the intersection between the left and the liberal, but added that the hard-line ideology of PC triumphed over the *laissez-faire*, rebellious liberalism. The result is that PC turned ‘the liberalism of the 1960s into a dogmatic and conformist, even bullying, ideology’.²

It was the turning of tolerance into intolerance that provoked Frederick Forsyth to describe political correctness as ‘the new fascism’:

I loathe and despise political correctness; basically because it is a lie. It is a lie because it purports to be one thing while being the opposite. It began as a philosophy begging for greater tolerance and no right-minded person could object to that.

Tolerance—of other people, of minorities, of different appearances, habits and views—is the angel dust that marks the difference between a barbaric and a civilised society.

But PC has changed. From its original plea for tolerance of variables in what Malraux called ‘the human condition’, it soon began to adopt a conviction of rigid self-righteousness. Long since, it has developed into a new and intolerant bigotry, the very thing it was supposed to oppose.

PC now tolerates no dissent from its grinding uniformity, from its party-line-toeing orthodoxy. It smacks of Orwell’s *1984*, or former East Germany; it has become the new fascism.³

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The literary scholar John Ellis notes in his book *Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of Humanities* that Western intellectuals have been finding fault in their own societies and perfection in others since the Roman historian Tacitus eulogised the Germanic people in the first century AD. Although known as barbarians, Tacitus said they were unusually democratic, unsexist, maritally faithful and avoided vices such as pride and gluttony. The eighteenth-century Franco-Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau popularised the vilification of Western civilisation with his romanticising of the 'noble savage'. Ellis claims that the politically correct, by uncritically praising the non-West, are proving just how Western they really are:

political correctness itself is a thoroughly Western phenomenon. From earliest times, Western society has been prone to recurring fits of this self-doubt. Those who are seized by this mood may imagine that they are taking an anti-Western stance, but that is all part of the same pattern of self-delusion.⁴

Post-modern philosophy, which has emphasised cultural relativism and played down objective reality, has also fuelled political correctness. As Howard Schwartz, Professor of Organisational Behaviour at Oakland University, wrote:

When the idea of an objective external world is lost, the idea of achievement, of earning love on the basis of good work, no longer has meaning. Individuals who have had status in the past, and who legitimated that status by claims of achievement, come to be seen instead as having acquired their status illegitimately. The idea of gaining status through achievement comes to be seen as a smoke-screen for theft. Those who have had status are thus redefined as having stolen love from those of low status. They are seen as oppressors who deserve to be hated and attacked, and to have their power destroyed.⁵