

Introduction



Why Political Correctness?

Oh no! Not another book on political correctness! The past decades have seen massive output on this subject, primarily from the United States but increasingly in Europe as well. Isn't the issue exhausted by now? The many people who hate the concept would like to think so. But this is not just another book taking sides for or against a particular manifestation of PC, as almost all publications have done until now. Nor is it about the American campus issues of feminist, post-feminist, and anti-racist politics, although the content of those debates is very much a focus of the analysis to follow. Written from a perspective on Sweden, it concerns incidents that occurred there in the late 1990s. At the time the notion of political correctness was hardly understood in Sweden, even in its American trappings, but it has since become a problem arousing the passions of many.

Although I take a clear position against what I define as political correctness, I emphatically do not define it in terms of its particular contemporary content, be it feminist or multiculturalist. Rather, I define it in structural terms, arguing that multiculturalism is part of a rising elite identity and that the discourse of political correctness has played a significant role in its establishment. The structural relation between the content of PC discourse and its formal properties is significant, but it is not an analytical relation—the one cannot be deduced from the other. Instead, the relation is one that connects the insecure identity of rising or falling elites with the need to establish or maintain dominant ideologies and a clear moral order. The moralization of the social world derives from this anxious situation, but the particular content of the ideology imposed can vary greatly, very much more so than envisioned by most of those who have participated in the PC debates.

The literature on PC has tended to conflate the content of PC with its form, so that the issues have been reduced to conservatives versus liberals, right versus left.¹ Even a sociolinguist, D. Cameron (1994), has simply assumed

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the political content of political correctness, perhaps influenced by her own engagement in the concrete issues. Her analysis, however, does focus on the general issue of the political nature of language, a point that is made more vociferously by those directly inspired by Foucault (Choi and Murphy 1992). Cameron uses the expression “I am not politically incorrect” to show how the notion itself has changed, how it once was internal to the left and meant simply, “I am committed to leftist/feminist causes, but not humorless or doctrinaire about it” (15) but has now been refigured to mean that one was party to a new dichotomy defined by conservatives.

To say yes was to claim for yourself a definition constructed by conservatives for the express purpose of discrediting you; to say no was to place yourself among those conservatives. (16)

This change was orchestrated by the right itself, in an example of “the politics of definition” (16). While Cameron does not consider this to be part of the PC phenomenon itself, in our analysis the politics of definition is the very core of politically correct thinking. Her focus is on the politics of linguistic usage—its role in political action—and from this perspective, it is progressives who are trying to change society for the better by attacking older, accepted categories and arguing for a political intervention into language itself. Since language influences thinking and action, its transformation can help bring forth new political realities. Thus the word African-American is an improvement over Black.

Someone who claims African American is a euphemism because it makes no reference to skin colour is implicitly asserting that a description of people by skin color is a value-neutral description. (28)

In associating PC with a particular political strategy, she falls into the same kinds of arguments that are used in the defense of PC. The above example is truly exemplary in this respect. The preference for the term African American assumes that reference to skin color is intrinsically less value-neutral than reference to geographical origin. And why should this be the case? As another chapter in the same collection (Appignanesi 2005) makes clear, in France the use of skin color terminology is not understood as demeaning (although a PC argument might tend to attribute this to unconscious racism). Any anthropologist ought to grasp that if there is anything that is relative, it is the connotations of semantic categories. The argument ends in a statement of the need to democratize language, to break down categories in a general strategy of giving voice to the formerly silenced. PC is primarily about a politics of semantic and thus political deconstruction.

The most general statements of PC claim to represent a politics of pluralism in all senses. Western rationality, national identity, monoculturalism,

essentialism are all seen as conservative or even reactionary, destined for deconstruction and dissolution, ultimately to be replaced by a truly pluralist world. A philosophical version of PC identifies conservative ideology as the entire edifice of modernist Western science and philosophy, objectivism, and foundationalism (Choi and Murphy 1992). The position that Choi and Murphy associate with PC is simply “the postmodern alternative.” Their text is heavily influenced by Stanley Fish and radical constructivism. The notion that the categories of language, like those of the rest of social life, are products of human creative action and have to be practiced to exist is not necessarily postmodern, but it has become an identifying characteristic of the position. Thus even such a diehard modernist figure as Bourdieu is incorporated into the project, although he himself was very critical of postmodernism. The reason is simply that his approach to social practice, a variant of a certain Marxist tradition, treats social categories and structures of language as socially constituted in practice. What is perhaps more specific in their work is the proposition that there are no autonomous properties of reality that are not reducible to language, which implies the further crucial proposition that rational argument in which statements are compared to, or tested against, “reality” is impossible. In the end the establishment of “regimes of truth” is entirely a matter of power, the power of imposition.

For Stanley Fish, one of the key figures of the political correctness movement, the politics of definition is a major instrument in the establishment of the good and true. No arguments are necessary nor even interesting. Being thoroughly interwoven with postmodernist categorizations, multiculturalism and post-feminism form the basis of the new ideology, so they may indeed seem inseparable from the need for a politics of definition and the ensuing moral categorization that divides the world into good guys and bad.

My aim in the following is not to enter into these discussions and to take a stand for or against the above positions. It is rather to analyze the PC phenomenon as a particular social reality—a reality that is a diagnostic of a particular state of social existence that harbors serious dangers (in the factual, not the moral sense) for the maintenance of the critical rational arena that is the core of much of modern existence.

Why Me?

This book was inspired by a series of incidents in my own life. It might and will be said that this fact distorts the entire content of a study that should never have seen the light of day. Some of my colleagues have said as much. But of course that content did see the light of day in the Swedish media and spread

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via academic gossip to other parts of the world. The events at the core of my discussion occurred in Sweden, a country that became my home and the place where my children grew up. Sweden was indeed something of the ideal that so many American intellectuals chalked it up to be. It was very easy for Americans to inhabit this society, with its luxurious daycare centers, easy relations with most public institutions, high degree of acceptance of people, and willingness to engage in very serious discussion about almost all subjects. Olof Palme had certainly made the country attractive to those on the left with his Third World, pro-Vietnam politics, his and others' tolerant socialist rhetoric, and an activist left movement tolerated by officialdom as well as the police. It wasn't simply the welfare and the world's mother-in-law syndrome—all made possible by the exceptional growth of an intact industrial-based export economy after World War II—that seemed utopian to many foreigners; it was the atmosphere of experimentation, of a cult of the future. But Sweden in the 1970s was not only a country of high ideals in which many intellectuals could take radical positions yet remain in the mainstream; it was also a country dominated by a moral discourse, a discourse of "the good," that often made it difficult to question and criticize just what it was that was being so defined.

In the 1970s this made little difference for people who, like myself, were engaged on the Left. Here there was little control. The numerous student movements were never subjected to police violence as in other European countries. The sense of experiment was not merely localized to student movements—it resonated in broader segments of society and had the sanction of the state. There were, of course, ideologies, most of them very critical of social democracy, which was hardly considered leftist at the time, even if the party's ranks were subsequently filled by "radicals." For many left-leaning thinkers from other countries in Europe and the United States, Swedish social democracy appeared to be a successful alternative. Here, after all, was a society that was really trying to reconstruct itself in more egalitarian terms. It was saturated with a strong idealism that was put into practice. The social world I lived in contrasted with that in the United States I had left, initially for France and England. It was a social world based on the maximization of social security, where everyone in principle was to be taken care of—like it or not. The paradox of the 1970s is that even as they marked the beginning of the dis-integration of the Swedish model, they were also the consummation of welfare politics.

For many like myself this was a period of exhilaration, not just in Sweden but in large parts of the West. There was a certain freedom of expression in the air, even if we were unknowingly living to some degree in an ideological cage. Our cage was clearly free from onslaught by state power, at least in Sweden. Others were not free in this period. Some retreated to their offices and homes. These were not people who had been engaged in conservative politics, but

people who were not engaged at all and found engagement something strange and distasteful. For some of these academics, the situation was indeed tragic, but they would have their revenge in the years to come. The vision of those years as a dictatorship of radical students is overdrawn, as most descriptions of the period reveal that it was characterized by internal debates and struggles. Within Marxism, for instance, intellectual debates contributed substantially to that ideology's demise, though there were also stronger, more global reasons for its decline. In France the Althusserians (structural Marxists) were very divided and often exercised exclusionary tactics, party-style, but the debate on conceptual issues was vigorous enough to considerably weaken the received understanding of Marxist explanation. Similar debates in England led to a dismembering of structural Marxism (Hindess and Hirst 1975). All this marked the start of a broader transformation that I have alluded to as the decline of modernism, or in concrete terms, a decline in belief in the future and development, along with an increasing focus on self-identity or a more general cynicism. Thus, although the debates were quintessentially modernist, a larger disintegration of modernist identity loomed.

Out of this arose, seemingly, new ways of making sense of the world—but of course they were not new. There was a shift from class to culture in leftist circles, but more fundamentally a shift from a project of social reconstruction to a project of self-identification. This was the age of roots, of genealogical politics and a skyrocketing number of cultural movements that varied greatly in their particular goals but were always and everywhere rooted in fixed cultural characteristics upon which identity could be pinned (Friedman 1994). It was this massive displacement of perspectives within my own social world that attracted my interest to the relations between global process and cultural identity. In the United States, the cultural politics that developed as of the early 1970s took such forms as Black Power and Red Power and then proliferated into an explosive movement against a formerly hegemonic Western culture with all its epithets: male, heterosexual, white, middle-aged. This was primarily a campus phenomenon, but it reflected more powerful transformations in our civilization. In Western Europe it was soon paralleled by the re-emergence of ethnic regionalism, the culturalization of national identity, the emergence of indigenous movements, and the ethnification of immigrant minorities. All these shifts occurred within the same time frame in large parts of the Western-dominated world.

The academic world, as that of other cultural elites, became fractioned. One of the major rising elites identified itself as culturally radical and post-colonial (Dirlik 1997). This elite was at first multicultural but soon struggled with the apparent essentialism of cultural identity and sought something higher and more encompassing for itself. This took the form of a cosmopolitanism that celebrated the combination of diverse elements into hybrid fusions

associated with world citizenry as the only morally acceptable future for the world. The locus of this kind of discourse is multiple yet related, I suggest, to a changing experience of the world. This is the world described for Reich's (1991) "symbolic analysts"—the new, fast-moving, fast-thinking managerial class, the yuppies, the media elite who played an important role in the establishment of this new regime of legitimacy. In most Western countries this elite has been one among many, and I would add that there is plenty of internal variation. In Sweden, which has a remarkably centralized elite, this particular "progressive" worldview became the dominant one. And in Sweden, where national identity was simply taken for granted and the social democratic welfare state was predicated on a basic unity of values and a specific culture of representativity, the emergence of this new ideology entailed a radical rupture with respect to the previous state of social affairs.

In this reconfiguration of positions, the state moved toward a strategy that can readily be recognized in the European Third Way and the Neue Mitte: a consolidation of political power, including rapidly increasing salaries for politicians; a strong pro-globalization politics; and, most markedly in Sweden, a redefinition of the nation-state as a multicultural state in which Swedish nationals are redefined in principle as just another ethnic group. It is sometimes suggested that massive immigration in the 1980s and 1990s caused this particular change, but I would argue that it is only one part of the story. In fact, the redefinition of Swedish society by its elites produced a situation that institutionalized migration into a social category. Integration could only fail in a society with high unemployment and downward mobility, and even when the economy picked up again, briefly, the segregation persisted, becoming more aggravated. Yet the dominant, unchallenged ideology was that Sweden was now the world, that it had become culturally enriched and even creolized. Anyone seeking to take up the real situation—increasing conflicts, segregation, ethnically based criminality, and the like—was immediately branded an enemy of society, that is, the state and its elites. Academics and journalists shared this view, though they were known to say the most outrageous things in private. The head of the program on immigration and ethnic studies at a university college in Malmö stated in a seminar that it was important that researchers take up only the bright side of multicultural Sweden, so as not to ignite conflicts.

In this atmosphere in which a rising elite was propagating a new ideology, it became important to avoid issues that might puncture the images of the new world to be achieved. Either be silent or say the right thing—and silence might as well prevail, since it can never be known just how "right" one is. This is a very general issue that has been extensively discussed in the United States, though with little attempt to provide a general account. Thus Hughes, in his *Culture of Complaint* (1993) writes,

We want to create a sort of linguistic Lourdes, where evil and misfortune are dispelled by a dip in the waters of euphemism. Does the cripple rise from his wheelchair, or feel better about being stuck in it, because someone decided that, for official purposes, he was “physically challenged”? (1992: 18–19)

In the United States, thousands of people ended up in court for saying the wrong thing and some were even relieved of their jobs, not least in universities, but the field within which control over language use was exercised was limited to specific institutions and only rarely became a larger problem. The Swedish situation is different in this respect, first because of the lack of real intellectual opposition to the reform called multiculturalism, and second due to the centralized nature of the control of language. This is implemented by immediately classifying wrongdoers as racists, fascists, and Nazis. Meanwhile, the growing semantic field of dangerous propositions has been extraordinary. If, say, Danes vote against the European monetary union, then Swedish commentators and politicians might (and did) account for this in terms of xenophobia and a troubling tendency to racism. The Swedish prime minister even suggested that the Left Party, which is also somewhat anti-European Union, was a fellow-traveler in this dangerously fascistic tendency. The “logic” is not unique, of course, and is rampant among many intellectuals, but in Sweden it is official state ideology and strongly entrenched in all “respectable” parties.

This book, then, is an exploration of a family of phenomena that I feel it is crucial to understand, not simply because it has affected my own life but because having lived through it, I have discovered that it is indeed a general phenomenon worthy of investigation. But there is something more important here. The core of any intellectual environment and of intellectual creativity is the existence of an intellectual public sphere, one that requires the confrontation of different interpretations of reality—not their juxtaposition, but their real confrontation. Of course one might retreat from this assertion, claiming in postmodern fashion that all interpretations are equal and that an “edifying conversation” will do just fine. But this leads to an accumulation of interpretations, models, and theories that are no longer subjected to argument, falsification, and the like. One might of course contend that this leads to an enriching cornucopia of possible understandings of the world, but I maintain that more powerful forces are at work. Not all interpretations of reality are acceptable, and many are discarded for reasons of academic power, failure to make it in the market, or, in this particular case, failure to conform “morally” to the currently accepted interpretation of the world. Karl Popper’s vision of science may be dead, even as an ideal type, but what has replaced it in the human sciences is a moral politics that, I shall argue, is a product of an ideological struggle linked to the establishment of new elites.

In what follows I attempt to come to grips with two related phenomena. One is the formal or structural nature of political correctness as a form of

communication and categorization. The other is the transformation of the social context that, in my view, lays the ground for the implementation of this form of communication. PC discourse consists in the “moralization” of the social universe and its dichotomization into what can be said and what cannot. It can occur in quite trivial situations within groups where social control depends on avoidance of sensitive issues. In its most basic form it is part of the discourse of “respect,” in which a look, a remark, a movement, can be experienced as a threat by a gang leader. The object of my analysis is the massive transformation that has reordered the social reality of many European welfare states and particularly Sweden, where the transformation is most glaring. The first half of the book focuses on incidents that occurred in Sweden in the 1990s. It refers to real people, since this is not a mere ethnography but also a statement about the world that I and many others inhabit. All statements are documented. Many of the people I discuss will undoubtedly see all kinds of implicit motives that they may piece together via various associations, which will simply illustrate and even amplify my analysis of politically correct discourse. This part of the book also ventures a comparison with similar phenomena in other countries in order to arrive at a general understanding of the deeper structures involved. The second half of the book examines more closely the transformation of the social context, the restructuring of class relations and elites in the West, and their relation to the emergence of a new hegemonic discourse. While it is indeed important to engage this discourse, it is even more important to lay bare its social foundations—not because this in any way vitiates the discourse, but because its interlocutors have not seen fit to do so, and this lack of self-reflection is a reflex of the project of hegemony itself, the generalization of positioned interpretations into self-evident truths.

This is not, as I have stressed, a book about the pros and cons of any particular form of political correctness, the focus of so many recent books. But it is certainly a general critique of all forms of political correctness as a means of suppressing debate. It is about the nature of a specific mode of communication, one that is part of everyday verbal interaction but becomes dominant in certain kinds of situations. It is primarily about the real historical conditions that have led to the contemporary issue of political correctness. These global transformations have produced major ideological reconfigurations and new elites, or at least the re-identification of already established elites. In the end, this is a book that suggests, via the discussion of the PC phenomenon, that the decreasing capacity for rational critique by intellectuals is part of the urgent problems confronting us. Zygmunt Bauman has suggested that there is a new totalitarianism on the horizon that is not imposed by dictators but, increasingly, produced by a self-willed adaptation to new social conditions of power. Intellectuals, among other cultural elites, have led the way to this adaptation. Following a curious displacement of a well-known global economic policy,

cultural elites, as major beneficiaries of the new globalized stratification, have actively engaged in their own intellectual structural adjustment. What follows is thus politically engaged against the emergence of the enthusiastic passivity that has inundated a public arena once characterized by real social critique, argument, and confrontation.

Since 2002, when this was first written, the sense of urgency has increased. In the intervening years, while the manuscript was on the back burner, the new material streaming in has only increased the dismay that prompted the original project. Political correctness has spread to ever more sectors of social life. Though it has been criticized and discussed in a number of publications, PC has not yet been dealt with as an anthropological issue, a situation I hope to remedy in the following chapters.

Note

1. It is important to note here that left and liberal are also terms that mean very different things in Europe and in the United States. Liberal in the U.S. is often equated with left, whereas in Europe it represents the political midpoint and sometimes a position somewhat to the right of center. There is also a common confusion of “cultural” versus “political” positions. Multiculturalism and feminism are often designated as leftist, but in fact their distribution among and within political parties traverses the entire right-left spectrum.