

On Political Correctness

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We live in a time that is anti-political correctness and we work in academic institutions that are often vilified because of their perceived political correctness. In Canada and elsewhere, we are witnessing a reactionary political wave that is often focused around the idea that political correctness has ‘gone too far’ and ‘regular people’ are fighting back with ‘common sense.’ Indeed, some readers may agree, at least in part, and it would be naïve to suppose that we will not increasingly face these attitudes in our communities and in the classroom over the next few years.

What I propose are ways to think about and discuss cases of political correctness so as to avoid polarizing polemics and increase mutual understanding. The account is far from comprehensive or definitive, but is only intended as a heuristic to facilitate more rational, compassionate, and effectual discussion. The goal is to help us envision and create more just and equitable institutions by talking *with* each other rather than *past* each other.

Although I use the term descriptively, typically ‘political correctness’ is a term of abuse, used against a variety of practices that, despite their diversity, have a similar character. Almost invariably, what is dismissed as ‘politically correct’ is a new practice that is recommended or requested as a replacement for an old one. Thus the derisive dismissal of a new practice as ‘politically correct’ is, in effect, an endorsement of the old one.

If we stop here, all we will see is a power struggle between progressive and conservative values. To help us dig deeper, I will share with you a particular case of calling out, or language policing, as an example of political correctness that has shaped the way I think about these interactions. This incident happened to

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a Jewish friend of mine in the course of our undergraduate studies when she was directing a play about the Shoah. During auditions, a young woman casually used the term ‘Jewed’ to mean cheated. When my friend challenged her, the young woman replied that it wasn’t offensive; it was just the way people from her town talked.

Now, I use this example because I think it’s clear that this young woman was in the wrong; my friend wasn’t being oversensitive and was right to call her out. But this example is also useful because it’s fairly typical of cases where someone attempts a politically correct intervention and it is rejected: a speaker uses a term historically shaped by and reflective of discrimination against a particular group that is widely used in their community; they are called out for using it as it is deemed offensive; they respond, not with an apology or even a question, but with outright dismissal, asserting that their usage is common and inoffensive. Often, such responses come with an implicit or explicit criticism that the person who intervened and challenged the term is oversensitive, irrational, or controlling. Sometimes, speakers will themselves claim victimization at being called out, thus, ironically, enacting the hypersensitivity that they attribute to the politically correct intervenor.

In thinking about my friend’s experience and other situations that fit this pattern, it strikes me that politically correct interventions tend to share the same kinds of motivations, which may not be fully appreciated by those who reject them. By clearly articulating what moves people to request or demand politically correct changes to current practices, my hope is that we can develop more productive ways of engaging disputes and anxieties around political correctness.

Happily, these motivations are not particularly complicated but, I believe, simply amount to the following three claims about the current term or practice that justify the intervention:

1. the term or practice is considered insulting to the members of a group to which it pertains;
2. the term or practice implies something that is false and reflects and reinforces this inaccuracy; and
3. the term or practice implicitly endorses or maintains unjust or otherwise pernicious attitudes about the group that facilitates discrimination and various other harms against its members.

So, in my friend’s case, she was right to call out this young woman, who had (1) insulted her to her face, (2) implied something about the Jewish community that is false, something that is not *merely* false but also (3) dangerously and perniciously anti-Semitic.

Now, in any particular instance, it is an open question whether in fact a specific term or practice *is* offensive, inaccurate, or implicitly facilitates discrimination. Social psychological work on implicit biases has shown that good

intentions and heartfelt commitments are not enough to address discrimination.¹ This is where the difficult work starts and tough conversations must happen. It will take a good deal of effort to learn to see injustices that are embedded in our ordinary language and everyday practices. Figuring out how to live in ways that are consistent with our avowed commitments to justice and equality is not going to be easy. Honestly examining evidence that may show that we have behaved badly requires integrity and engaging in painful conversations across our many differences takes real courage. Such work can only begin, however, once we recognize that *dismissing* something as ‘mere political correctness’ is a *refusal* to even consider the possibility that it might be (1) offensive, (2) inaccurate, or (3) discriminatory.

Often such refusals are grounded in defensiveness and embarrassment. I suspect many of us can recognize the young woman’s sense of shock, hurt, and denial in being called out for anti-Semitism. I think we can safely assume that a sincere part of her identity included not being anti-Semitic; after all, she was auditioning for a play about the Shoah. Any of us who have been called out for saying something sexist, heterosexist, racist, ableist, cis-sexist, or classist will recognize the sting. As we manage conversations around political correctness, we need to support students, colleagues, and ourselves so we can move beyond these knee-jerk reactions and do the difficult work of trying to understand why someone is offended, what is implied by certain terms and practices, and whether these implications are false, pernicious, or discriminatory.

To this point, I’ve discussed an example that is fairly uncontroversial, but the test of my proposal is whether it can usefully be applied to more contentious cases. Recently, there has been a flurry of anxious discussion around attempts to require professors to adopt or at least allow the singular ‘they’ in their own and their students’ academic work. The charge has been led by Dr. Jordan Peterson, a professor at the University of Toronto, who has harshly criticized new laws and university policies designed to recognize and include genderqueer, two-spirited, and non-binary folks. Peterson maintains that many of these policies amount to an ideological policing of expression that is characteristic of “totalitarian and authoritarian political states.”² Peterson particularly

¹ The Kirwan Institute has a useful primer on implicit bias: Cheryl Saats, *State of the Science: Implicit Bias Review* (Cleveland, OH: Kirwan Institute, 2014), available at <http://kirwaninstitute.osu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/2014-implicit-bias.pdf> (accessed May 27, 2017); for a more scholarly introduction see Anthony Greenwald and Mahzarin Banaji, “Implicit Social Cognition: Attitudes, Self-Esteem, and Stereotypes,” *Psychological Review* 102 (1) (1994): 4-27.

² Sean Craig, “U of T Professor Attacks Political Correctness, Says He Refuses to Use Genderless Pronouns,” *National Post* (September 28, 2016), available at <http://news.nationalpost.com/news/canada/u-of-t-professor-attacks-political-correctness-in-video-refuses-to-use-genderless-pronouns> (accessed May 27, 2017).

objects to allowing people to specify their own preferred non-binary pronouns and refuses to use the singular ‘they,’ despite its growing acceptance. If the analysis I have offered is a good one, it should provide insight into why politically correct intervenors are requesting this change in pronoun use and help us identify where substantive disagreements may lie between them and those who, like Peterson, dismiss the intervention as mere political correctness.

First, it is worth clearly identifying the old practice that is being challenged—in this case, the use of gendered singular pronouns, both when a non-binary person explicitly requests the use of a non-gendered pronoun and in general contexts to refer to a generic person, whose gender is unspecified. It is not difficult to imagine that, in contexts where someone explicitly requests to be addressed by a particular pronoun, not doing so will be experienced as insulting. Indeed, even if we have not personally had the experience of being misgendered (and many of us have, cis³ and trans alike), we can all imagine being referred to by whatever we deem to be the wrong pronoun. If someone were to continue to misgender us, despite being corrected, many of us would find it galling, to say the least. Regarding the generic usage, just as employing ‘he’ as a gender-neutral pronoun implicitly leaves out women and girls, using ‘he or she’ leaves out non-binary folks. The implicit insult of being treated as if not only oneself but a whole group to which one belongs does not exist is much the same in both cases.

Beyond the issue of offence is the problem that the old practice is inaccurate; it implies that there are only two gender identities and, at a more basic biological level, that all people are unambiguously either male or female. Neither of these claims is true. While non-binary and trans identities have only recently come to enjoy their current visibility in mainstream North America, there are many other cultures (including some traditional cultures indigenous to the Americas) that have openly recognized third genders or ways of combining or transitioning between genders for centuries.⁴ The biological facts are even plainer. Whether referred to as ‘disorders of sexual development’ or ‘intersex conditions,’ there are those who are born with genitalia or other characteristics that are neither standardly male nor female but are a mix of both.⁵ Of course,

³ ‘Cis’ or ‘cisgendered’ is the converse of ‘trans,’ ‘trans*,’ or ‘transgendered,’ denoting those people who identify with the gender they were assigned at birth.

⁴ PBS’s *Independent Lens* provides a useful “Map of Gender Diverse Cultures,” available at http://www.pbs.org/independentlens/content/two-spirits_map-html/ (accessed May 27, 2017). More scholarly sources include Sabine Lang’s *Men as Women, Women as Men: Changing Gender in Native American Cultures*, translated by John L. Vatine (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1998) and “Living on the Extreme Margin: Social Exclusion of the Transgender Population (Hijra) in Bangladesh” by Sharful Islam Khan et al., *Journal of Health, Population and Nutrition* 27 (4) (2009): 441-451.

⁵ Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*. NY: Basic Books, 2000.

many people with these conditions choose binary identities but some don't. So, advocacy for the singular 'they' is motivated by some pretty uncontroversial facts about non-binary identities and human diversity, both biological and social.

Once we really think about the facts, the traditional practice of using binary pronouns begins to look pretty nasty. Either it suggests that non-binary people just don't matter, so we don't need to respect their requests pertaining to how we refer to them or include them in our generalizations about large groups of people; or, it suggests that non-binary folks don't *really* exist at all, and those who claim to be non-binary are in some sense pathological, unnatural, or inauthentic. Both attitudes clearly marginalize non-binary folks and appear to do so unjustly. But, on top of this, there are reasons to think that these kinds of attitudes underlie various serious harms, ranging from daily microinequities to violent hate crimes committed against trans people.⁶ The individual and social psychology is no doubt complicated, but if there is even a chance that a current linguistic practice has a role in supporting the kinds of harms and violence experienced by non-binary folks, we had better have compelling, well-evidenced reasons for retaining the practice.

For those who disagree about this case or any other, the right response is not sneering or bombastic dismissal. Rather, after an honest attempt to understand the motivations for the requested change and careful consideration of the evidence, the right response is a gentle explanation and respectful refusal. After all, the best case in these situations is that one has inadvertently insulted someone and, even if they shouldn't have been insulted, an apology is a kindness and, moreover, customary.

We should all expect to be held accountable for what we say, particularly in the academy, where our professional norms typically favour accurate language. We should expect to be held accountable for harms we cause or are complicit in, even if these harms are unintentional. When this accountability amounts to little more than changing our habits of speech, it is difficult to understand why anyone would object.

If my analysis is right, we can now see why the knee-jerk dismissal of something as politically correct is so nasty; it amounts to a self-righteous choice not only to insult others but to protect one's ignorance and tacitly support discrimination.

⁶ To get a sense of these harms experienced by trans Canadians, see *Transgender People in Ontario, Canada: Statistics from the Trans PULSE Project to Inform Human Rights Policy*, prepared by Greta Bauer and Ayden Scheim (London, 2015), available at http://www.rainbowhealthontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/woocommerce_uploads/2015/09/Trans-PULSE-Statistics-Relevant-for-Human-Rights-Policy-June-2015.pdf (accessed May 27, 2017).

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