

# Political Correctness in the Era of Trump



# Political Correctness in the Era of Trump:

*Threat to Freedom  
or Ideological Scapegoat?*

Edited by

Luigi Esposito and Laura Finley

Cambridge  
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Publishing



Political Correctness in the Era of Trump:  
Threat to Freedom or Ideological Scapegoat?

Series: Peace Studies: Edges and Innovations

Edited by Luigi Esposito and Laura Finley

This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-2077-3

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-2077-6

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND DEDICATION

### **Luigi Esposito:**

My sincere gratitude to my co-editor and esteemed colleague, Dr. Laura Finley, who agreed to embark on this project with me. I also want to thank all of our contributors. I have known some of you for many years, and your insights have had a great impact on both my professional and personal life. I hope our friendship and collaboration will continue for many years to come.

### **Laura Finley:**

I offer my deepest gratitude to Dr. Luigi Esposito for coming up with the idea of this book and for allowing me to be involved in the project. Few people in higher education are as fortunate as I am to work with amazing and conscientious colleagues like Dr. Esposito.

I also thank all of our contributors who made this effort so smooth. Each chapter is thoughtful, timely, and informative. Everyone involved followed our timeline and other guidelines, making our job as editors so much easier.

Finally, I'd like to acknowledge my colleagues with the Peace and Justice Studies Association (PJSA), in particular Dr. Michael Minch, who helped spearhead this series and who kindly agreed to write the Foreword for this volume. May you all have great success and joy as you continue your work making the world a more peaceful place. I dedicate this book to all of you, and all my portion of royalties will be provided to PJSA.



## SERIES INTRODUCTION

### LAURA FINLEY AND MICHAEL MINCH ON BEHALF OF THE PEACE AND JUSTICE STUDIES ASSOCIATION (PJSA)

Peace Studies: Edges and Innovations is a book series edited by PJSA Board Members Michael Minch and Laura Finley. The intent of the series is to fill in gaps in the conflict, peace, justice and reconciliation literature while presenting texts that are on the cutting edge of the discipline. The series includes both edited and solo-authored books that combine academic rigor and accessible prose, making them appealing to scholars, classrooms, activists, practitioners and policymakers.

Books in the series focus on re-conceptualizing and expanding peace education, looking to and drawing from communities that have been marginalized, overlooked, or forgotten; identify new understandings of the role that gender, multiculturalism and diversity play in the creation of a sustained peace; promoting innovative peacebuilding strategies and movements related to positive peace and justice; exploring the relationship between peace studies and other contemporary problematics, such as climate change and the rights of indigenous peoples; addressing the overlap, interpenetration and symbiosis between peace and conflict studies and other disciplinary areas; and analyzing current issues in criminal justice, with an emphasis on restorative alternatives. Due to the breadth of the topic matter, the series is appropriate for readers of all disciplinary traditions.

In sum, the series aims to promote the most interesting and exciting trends or movements in the field of peace and conflict studies. It is also intended to render more visible the unique contributions of peacemakers and to promote the mission and goals of the PJSA.

The Peace and Justice Studies Association is a binational non-profit organization with the mission of creating a just and peaceful world through research, education and action. PJSA is dedicated to bringing together academics, K-12 teachers, and grassroots activists to explore alternatives to violence and share visions and strategies for peacebuilding, social justice, and social change. The organization serves as a professional

association for scholars in the field of peace and conflict studies, and is the North American affiliate of the International Peace Research Association. Additional information about PJSa can be found at [www.peacejusticestudies.org](http://www.peacejusticestudies.org).

### **Books in the Series**

Amster, Randall, Finley, Laura, McKutcheon, Richard and Pries, Edmund (Eds.) *Peace Studies Traditions and Innovations* (2015).

Standish, Katerina. *Cultural Violence in the Classroom: Peace, Conflict and Education in Israel*. (2015).

Finley, Laura and Concannon, Kelly. (Eds.) *Peace and Social Justice Education on Campus: Faculty and Student Perspectives* (2015).

Goswami, Paromita. *Marketing Peace: Deconstructing Christian-Muslim Narratives of God, Salvation and Terrorism* (2017).

Gordon, Nickesia and Finley, Laura. *Reflections on Gender from a Communication Point of View* (2017).

Johnson, Matthew and Finley, Laura (Eds.) *Trumpism: The Politics of Gender in a Post-Propitious America* (2018)

## FOREWORD

MICHAEL MINCH, PH.D.

When Donald Trump was elected to the presidency of the United States, political scientists, and other analysts and observers immediately began to interrogate this surprise and seek to understand how it happened. Given the razor-thin margin of an electoral college win (coupled with a loss in the popular vote), any number of factors may have been enough, in singular fashion, to have secured the slim victory. Given the pervasive and popular angst and outrage about “political correctness” on the Right, and Mr. Trump’s continuous use of attacks against “political correctness,” it is a feasible hypothesis that the anti-PC discourse used on the Right and by candidate Trump could be one of the variables that, alone, gave Trump the White House. Political correctness, or perhaps more accurately, the pervasive discourse and outrage about it on the Right, is important. The cultural, and therefore political, power of this discourse and outrage may have elected any number of candidates to political office, including Mr. Trump, and has certainly fueled the Republican Party and Republican voters in the last three decades.

Contested conceptions of political correctness, and the consequences of narratives about political correctness, have become an important feature of cultural and political life in the United States. Yet, there is a scarcity of academic literature about it. This book is a much-needed contribution to fill this lacuna. The chapters that follow range from an explication of the philosophical foundations that have given rise to both concern for, and the criticism against, so-called political correctness—to the meanings of anti-PC discourse in a number of areas, from feminism to foreign policy. Indeed, this book may be unmatched in respect to the breadth of its vision, as it sees the debate about political correctness within a broad range of important aspects of culture and politics in the US.

Readers will learn that debate over “political correctness” extends to the late eighteenth century and has been a concept long used by those on the Right, and the Left. It is a far more complex idea than contemporary Right-wing critics allow. If you are tired of, worried, or energized by charges of “identity politics,” a “war on Christmas,” the “intolerance” of

“snowflakes” and “social justice warriors,” complaints about “the nanny state,” the “thought police,” “micro-aggressions,” and the need for “trigger warnings,” this book is for you. If you identify as a critic or an advocate of political correctness, this book will assist your understanding of its multiple meanings.

The most timely service this book gives us, is its demonstration of the relationship of the powerful discourse against political correctness, and the election of (and continued support for) Donald Trump. Would he have been elected without the widespread use of political correctness as a means to label the felt, or faux, victimization of his supporters? The authors cannot answer this question empirically, of course,<sup>1</sup> but they help us wrestle with the importance of the question and probabilities connected to its answer.

The most valuable service the book offers is the complexification of a debate that is consistently made far too simple. Notice, for example, that self-identified “conservatives” in the US have honed a particular skill with excellence—having somethings both ways. On one hand, they control most political, financial, and business institutions, and enjoy cultural hegemony on many fronts—yet they claim victimhood, as if they are locked out of power and influence. Hence, they have long been able to eat their cake and have it too. Relatedly, “conservatives” complain against political correctness for creating speech codes—that is, promoting acceptable ways to speak. Yet, “conservatives” use their own channels of communication and influence to promulgate acceptable ways to speak.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps “political correctness” is in fact, a charge that can go both directions.

In a number of ways, the contributors to this book demonstrate that the talk about political correctness, while deeply important, is too simple. They show that Donald Trump owes much of his support to rhetoric and discourse about political correctness, even while those narratives are misconceived, misguided, and misleading. Trump’s ill-informed, reckless,

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<sup>1</sup> Just as an empirically definitive answer cannot be given to the questions, “Did James Comey’s late discussion of Hillary Clinton’s emails, give Trump the election?” and “Did the Russian intervention in our election give the victory to Trump?” Evidence *suggests*, quite strongly, that both of these factors were important, and perhaps crucial, to the election of Mr. Trump. But that evidence cannot be definitive. The question of to what degree Mr. Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric was responsible for his election is, likewise, not subject to definitive conclusion. But it is subject to analysis that lends itself toward probability.

<sup>2</sup> The work of consultants like Frank Luntz, and media like Fox News, and the many radio programs on the (extreme) Right, serve this purpose. See Luntz, Frank. *Words that Work: It’s Not What You Say, It’s What People Hear*. New York: Hachette Books: 2015.

and deceitful language<sup>3</sup> resonates with a subcultural echo-chamber and epistemological bubble that promotes and rewards such language.<sup>4</sup> It is language that is proudly and loudly “politically *incorrect*.” Of course, language is about control, and cultural and political language that becomes pervasive becomes controlling language. It creates and constitutes power. Very much is at stake. To learn more deeply what is at stake, and how our shared narratives and discourse can be rescued and rehabilitated, I invite you to read this book. Dr. Luigi Esposito and Dr. Laura Finley have assembled an important book, in an important moment. All who want to understand how Donald Trump came to be president and how the Right conceives and contests; and how our culture and politics can be transformed—will want to read the pages that follow.

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<sup>3</sup> The *Washington Post* “fact checkers” who have been tracking his lies and misleading statements, report that during the 558 days since his inauguration, Mr. Trump has made at least 4,229 “false or misleading claims” in public. Glenn Kessler, Salvador Rizzo, and Meg Kelly. 2018. “President Trump Has Made 4,229 False or Misleading Claims in 558 Days,” August 1.

<sup>4</sup> See C. Thi Nguyen. 2018. “Escape the Echo Chamber,” *Aeon*, April 4, <https://aeon.co/essays/why-its-as-hard-to-escape-an-echo-chamber-as-it-is-to-fee-a-cult>. Look for the full scholarly article, “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Chambers,” forthcoming in *Episteme*.



## INTRODUCTION

# UNDERSTANDING POLITICAL CORRECTNESS: HISTORY, PHILOSOPHY, AND ITS CURRENT RELEVANCE IN THE ERA OF TRUMP

LUIGI ESPOSITO, PH.D.

This book analyzes the continued relevance of political correctness (PC) in shaping social and political discourse within the context of Donald Trump's political campaign and presidency. Central to this work is the idea that Trump's rise to the presidency was encouraged by, and has subsequently reinforced, an attack on beliefs, attitudes, values, and policies associated with PC. Although there is no unified or uncontested definition of PC, it is, in its most basic form, a set of linguistic norms, practices, and policies that seek to challenge the alienation and marginalization of socially and economically disadvantaged groups, which include poor people, women, racial and ethnic minorities, LGBTQ people, and the disabled. Since the 1990s, however, the term PC is typically associated with a type of leftist-progressive puritanism that prevents people from speaking their minds and/or voicing uncomfortable truths that might "offend" members of marginalized groups/communities. Accordingly, each of this book's chapters addresses many of the concerns raised by those who oppose PC as a leftist ideological movement that suppresses common sense, free speech and open debate. At the same time, each chapter addresses how, within the era of Trump, PC is also being increasingly employed by its opponents as a form of *ideological scapegoating* to legitimize an attack on discursive norms, attitudes, behaviors, values, and policies that are vital for upholding, among other ideals, peace, democracy, racial and gender equality, multiculturalism, human rights, empathy, and social/economic justice.

While debates surrounding PC are associated with the so-called "culture wars" that became prevalent, particularly on college campuses, beginning in the late 1980s and 1990s, many critics contend that, with the popularity of social media and other advances in communications

technology, the attack on PC today is more far-reaching than ever before (e.g., Chait 2015; Hess 2016). In fact, a backlash against PC—not only in the United States but in Europe—has played a central role in revitalizing the sort of Right-wing populism that empowered Trump and other far-Right leaders in the West (Edsall 2016). Critics contend it is the liberal-leftist orthodoxy associated with PC that has undercut the interests of traditional white, Western, Christian, heterosexual, working and middle-class people by preventing them from defending their own interests in the name of multiculturalism, equality, and social justice. Political correctness, in this sense, has become the ultimate *ideological scapegoat* on which to blame both personal and societal problems, particularly among working and middle class White Americans who are resentful of the demographic and cultural shifts that are perceived as anathema to “traditional America” and have displaced their rightful place in U.S. society.

Donald Trump very cleverly capitalized on these sentiments and managed to employ PC as an *ideological scapegoat* to garner support for a political agenda predicated on populist resentments against, among other groups/considerations, the political elite, Muslims, illegal immigrants, racial minorities, gender equality, secularism, inclusive curriculums, and the mainstream media. Indeed, Trump’s appeal to millions of people in the U.S. and around the world hinges on the belief that his presidency represents an antidote to a perceived leftist take-over, both at the level of culture and policy, that sustains a corrupt status quo and has been presumably normalized by PC. This volume, accordingly, deals with the historical, structural, philosophical and ideological currents that made large numbers of people receptive to Trump’s message that vanquishing PC is a requisite for “making American great again.” The volume also addresses the social-political implications of this message as it pertains to race and ethnic relations, gender issues; higher education; terrorism and national security, the media, and immigration. The tensions between PC as an emancipatory set of linguistic norms and practices that encourage multiculturalism and challenge oppression and injustice, versus PC as an ideological movement that thwarts open dialogue and oppositional viewpoints are also explored.

## **Trump as the Anti-PC President**

Donald J. Trump’s presidential election in November 8, 2016 has often been described as the biggest upset in U.S. political history (Goldmacher and Shreckinger 2016). How did a real-estate developer turned reality TV star with no political experience manage to defeat 16 GOP candidates, the majority of whom were seasoned politicians, in the primaries? More

importantly, how was Trump able to prevail over the so-called “Clinton political machine” in the general election? While a multitude of issues might have promoted Trump’s presidential victory, arguably the most important factor that encouraged millions of mostly White Americans to support Trump was the belief that he represented a repudiation of the political establishment (e.g., Flegenheimer and Barbaro 2016).

Central to Trump’s status as a “maverick” or “outsider,” particularly in the eyes of his supporters, is the president’s blatant and unapologetic rejection of PC. Throughout his presidential campaign, Trump continuously reminded voters that being “anti-PC” would be the hallmark of his politics. Needless to say, Trump’s passionate anti-PC stance was far from fortuitous. Polls leading up to the 2016 election show that hostility against PC was salient among large segments of the U.S. electorate. For example, an October 2015 poll from Fairleigh Dickinson University found that 68 percent of Americans believed that Political Correctness is a “big problem” in society (Trump Taints America’s views on Political Correctness 2015); a Quinnipiac University Poll found that 51 percent of respondents believed PC is a bigger problem than prejudice (Hate Winning 2016); and a Pew Poll found that 59% percent of Americans felt that “too many people are easily offended these days over the language that others use” (Fingerhut 2016). Furthermore, according to survey data published by Clearthinking.org, with the exception of party affiliation, believing “there is too much political correctness in the country” was the most reliable predictor of whether or not voters intended to support Trump (Strongest Predictors of Voting for Trump 2016). More recent data suggests the discontent with PC has lingered and even increased after President Trump’s election. For example, the *2017 Free Speech and Tolerance Survey*, published by the CATO institute, finds that 71 percent of Americans say “political correctness has silenced discussions society needs to have,” and 58 percent claim they “have political views they are afraid to share” (Ekins 2017).

Political correctness, according to its critics, has created an ultra-repressive social-political environment in which abstract ideals associated with diversity, equality, and social justice take precedence over truth, common sense, national interests, and even nature itself. In doing so, PC and its proponents presumably compromise U.S. sovereignty and the safety of American citizens in the name of tolerance and multiculturalism; undermine free speech in the name of anti-bigotry; coddle undeserving minorities by encouraging a “nanny state” and culture of victimhood; erode traditional family structures and “natural” gender roles in the name of “gender equality;” weaken American exceptionalism in the name of diplomacy, peace, and civility; and foster a form of hyper-sensitivity that

“wussifies” the populace by giving credence to presumably silly ideas, popular on U.S. college campuses, like “safe spaces” “trigger warnings” and “micro-aggressions.” According to many Americans, it is precisely this culture of restraint and hyper-sensitivity demanded by so-called “social justice warriors” (i.e., activists associated with PC) that has compromised the greatness of America. Author Nick Adams effectively captures the perceived threat PC poses to American society when he states:

Nothing is more anti-American, anti-freedom, anti-truth, and anti-reality than political correctness. It is the noose around America’s neck, growing tighter each day. From identity politics and secularism to the all-powerful welfare state and the war against national identity, every problem in American is compounded by this suffocating regime of thought control (Adams 2016, xviii).

Considering the deep antipathy against PC that currently exists in the U.S., it is no wonder that Trump abandoned central norms of political discourse throughout his presidential campaign, and he did so with great success. Trump’s statements about the need to build a wall to prevent Mexican “rapists” and criminals from crossing the border; his proposal to “ban all Muslims” from entering the U.S., his declaration that fighting Islamic terrorists will require “taking out their families;” his pledge to bring back water-boarding; his call for violence against opponents at his political rallies; his insults against the press (e.g., calling out reporters critical of his statements and campaign as “scum,” “slime,” “dishonest,” “disgusting,” and, more recently, “the enemy of the people”), and his hyper-aggressive posturing and condescending remarks during the presidential debates (e.g., calling Jeb Bush “low energy Jeb,” Marco Rubio “little Marco,” Ted Cruz “Lying Ted,” and Hillary Clinton “Crooked Hillary,” etc.), were all blatant deviations from discursive norms that, in the eyes of his supporters, galvanized Trump’s reputation as a foe of PC who “tells it like it is.” Furthermore, because of his significant wealth, many voters believed Trump is not beholden to any benefactor who represented the PC establishment and was therefore in a unique position to challenge PC orthodoxy and lead America on a path towards restoring its “greatness.”

## **History of Political Correctness**

If one attempts to trace the origins of political correctness, it quickly becomes evident that there is no neat or clear history of this concept. According to various accounts, the earliest recorded use of the term “political correctness” (or, adjectivally, “politically correct”) can be traced

to 1793, to a U.S. Supreme Court case titled *Chisholm v. State of Georgia*, in which the Court ruled on whether citizens have the right to sue states. In this case, the U.S. Supreme Court declared that references to “the United States” are “not politically correct,” and should therefore be replaced by “the people of the United States,” implying that the American people, not the states or federal government, hold the true authority of the United States (e.g., Wilson 1995). Citizens, therefore, could sue states. Supporters of states’ rights did not agree, the Eleventh Amendment was passed to overturn the Chisholm decision, and the term politically correct “faded from memory” (Wilson 1995, 3).

A very different meaning of the term emerged much later, particularly during the early to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, when “politically correct” came into use among leftists to deride the orthodoxy prevalent among hardline supporters of the Communist Party, who held that the “party line” (referring to the Communist Party’s doctrine) must always be held as the ultimate standard of what is factual, acceptable, or “politically correct” (Kohl 1992). By the 1970s, the term “political correctness” was adopted by the New Left, and typically used in a semi-facetious manner. Feminists and other progressives advocating for social change during this time used the term “politically correct” sarcastically to refer to fellow leftists who were being self-righteous and failed to see the world outside their own political ideology (Perry 1992; Hall 1994).

During the late 1980s and 1990s, “political correctness” was appropriated by the Right, who gave the term its current pejorative meaning. As stated by Moira Weigel (2016), all of a sudden, “instead of a phrase leftists used to check dogmatic tendencies within their movement, ‘political correctness’ became a talking point for neoconservatives [who] said that PC constituted a Left-wing political program that was seizing control of American universities and cultural institutions.” This sort of position gained prominence with the publication of Allan Bloom’s bestselling book titled *The Closing of the American Mind* in 1987. Bloom argued that subsequent to the upheavals of the 1960s, efforts were made to make American higher education more attuned to ideals of democracy, equality, and openness. In reality, however, these efforts lead to an obsession with social activism and moral relativism that, according to Bloom, undermines the search for “truth,” discourages meaningful critical thinking, vulgarizes culture, and leads to moral bankruptcy (Bloom 1987). According to some writers, it was Bloom’s book that first inspired a campaign against political correctness (Platt 2002). The campaign proved to be successful, as even cultural leftists who support multiculturalism, social justice, inclusive language and other

basic ideals associated with PC are quite reluctant to identify with that label because of its derogatory connotation.

Shortly after Bloom's bestselling book was released, various other books appeared that further attacked values, attitudes, trends, and policies associated with PC, particularly as it pertains to U.S. higher learning. Two of the most popular were Roger Kimball's (1990) *Tenured Radicals: How Politics has Corrupted Higher Education*; and Dinesh D'Souza's (1991) *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Sex and Race on Campus*. According to Kimball (1990), as student radicals from the 1960s and 1970s earned doctorate degrees, entered the academy, and became tenured professors, department chairs, and even deans at prestigious universities, they systematically began to push for a Left-wing political agenda that demonized Western culture and undermined the traditional curriculum. This agenda emphasized presumably spurious lines of inquiry such as deconstruction and postmodernism which undermined the search for "truth," and gave legitimacy to black studies, gender studies, gay studies, post-colonial studies, and other programs of indoctrination that pass as "scholarship." Similarly, D'Souza (1991) argued that American higher education has been hijacked by what he calls "the victim's revolution." Namely, as efforts to empower minority groups and promote diversity and multiculturalism gained momentum from the 1960s onward, curriculums were emphasized that depicted Western culture as the enemy, policies such as affirmative action were implemented that encouraged preferential treatment and eroded academic standards, and all this led to significant resentment and divisions. Ultimately, D'Souza's point is that the politicization of education has compromised higher learning and PC is the ideological tool that leftists in the academy employ to defend their agenda.

Far from apolitical, however, these critics of PC have their own political agenda, or, at the very least, are influenced by those with an agenda. According to Jane Mayer, writers like Bloom and D'Souza were funded by far-Right billionaires—notably the Koch, Olin and Scaife families—who, beginning in the 1980s, encouraged a "counter-intelligentsia" that would spearhead a crusade against "big government" and PC (Mayer 2016). These efforts have gone a long way in terms of turning PC into an *ideological scapegoat* that is often used by those on the Right to legitimize their political motives.

## **The Marxist Legacy of PC from a Right-Wing Perspective: Attack on Western Culture**

Among those on the Right, one common (albeit highly controversial) claim is that the presumed tyranny associated with PC, especially as it pertains to today, is a manifestation of “cultural Marxism” and can be traced to the work of Marxists such as Georg Lukacs, Antonio Gramsci, and, subsequently, the strand of Critical Theory developed by the Frankfurt School. One of the main proponents of this view is William Lind, of the conservative think tank formerly known as *The Free Congress Foundation* (currently known as the *American Opportunity Foundation*), who argues that political correctness is “Marxism translated from economic to cultural terms” (Lind 2000). According to Lind, traditional Marxists had been convinced that with the onset of World War I, the working classes throughout Europe would come together and overthrow their governments. After all, workers would realize that they “had more in common with each other across national boundaries than they had in common with the bourgeoisie and ruling class in their own country.” Stated otherwise, the working classes in Europe would unite against their oppressors rather than fight a war against one another. Yet when the war broke out in 1914, it quickly became clear that workers throughout much of Europe did not come together along class interests to engage in revolutionary struggle but rather “rallied to their flag and happily marched off to fight each other” (Lind 2000).

This failure of class consciousness, according to Lind, spurred Marxists like Gramsci and Lukacs to investigate what had gone wrong. Both agreed that it was Western culture (including Christianity) that was preventing workers from seeing their common class interests. Revolutionary change, therefore, would require the destruction of Western civilization. With this objective in mind, Lukacs became minister of culture in his native Hungary in 1918 and quickly moved to implement a policy, referred to as “cultural terrorism,” in which people, and children in particular, were subjected to a process of re-socialization whereby they were encouraged to, among other things, abandon Christian values and embrace sexual permissiveness. According to various writers, Lukacs’ central motivation lied in the realization that the creation of a new socialist society would require undermining the family unit, eroding moral imperatives, and breaking down the fabric of Western society. Similarly, in his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci argued that revolutionary change involved a systematic “de-Christianization” of Western societies by means of a “long march” through the culture (Lind 2000; Kimball 2007; Williams 2016). Here again,

the values and moral norms that dominated Western culture had to be systematically eliminated to usher in a new order. The implied attack on Western culture, therefore, had to include churches, schools, the media, the family, entertainment, civic organizations, science, literature, and history (Kimball 2007).

In 1923, a think tank was established in Germany to devise ways of “translating Marxism into cultural terms” (Lind 2000). Felix Weil, a wealthy German who was sympathetic to Marxism, sponsored a week-long symposium to explore new trends in Marxist thought and brought in Georg Lukacs and several key German thinkers, including Karl Korsch and Friedrich Pollock, to partake in these discussions. Through funds made available by Weil and under the direction of philosopher and legal scholar Carl Gunberg, these discussions led to the creation of a center for Marxist thought called the *Institute of Social Research*, which later came to be known as *The Frankfurt School* (Jay 1996; Jeffries 2017). However, it was in the 1930s, under the direction of Marx Horkheimer, that the theoretical contributions of the Frankfurt School blossomed, as it was Horkheimer who recruited some of the school’s most talented thinkers, including Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, and Erich Fromm. All these writers developed an emancipatory critique of modern capitalist societies that came to be known as “Critical Theory.”

While thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School differed in their interests, they were generally concerned with drawing from various perspectives—these included first and foremost the pre-1844 work of Marx, but also Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis, and Max Weber’s critique of rationalization—in an effort to move beyond the economic determinism of traditional Marxism, understand the rise of fascism and Nazism, and explore how prevailing value systems and social structures in 20th century Western capitalist societies sustained and normalized relations of power and domination among different groups. Starting from the premise that the locus of domination in the modern world shifted from the economy to the cultural realm, many of the Frankfurt writers focused on how the “culture industry” and its attending values had a “pacifying, repressive, and stupefying effect on people” (Ritzer 2010, 285). Many contemporary critics have argued that this critique of Western culture and knowledge was an effort among those associated with the Frankfurt School to de-legitimize and ultimately destroy social structures and values systems such as patriotism, nationalism, Christianity, hierarchy, patriarchy, sexual restraint, and ethnocentrism, thereby promoting the decline of Western civilization (e.g., Lind 2000; Kimball 2007; William 2016). Although these points are highly controversial and even regarded by some as part of a Right-wing “conspiracy theory”

(Berkowitz 2003; Jeffries 2017, 6-7), they are widely espoused by many on the Right. Indeed, many far-Right critics contend that because the proletariat had failed to fulfill its historical role of bringing about revolutionary change, Marxists realized that the aim to eradicate relations of oppression required an attack on modern Western culture and its presumed maladies, and the Frankfurt School devoted itself precisely to this objective (Lind 2000; Buchanan 2002, Kimball 2007; Breitbart 2011).

Subsequent to the rise of the Nazis in 1933, the *Institute for Social Research* was shut down and those associated with the Frankfurt School (all of whom were not only Marxists but Jewish) were forced to flee Germany. The Institute was re-established in New York City shortly after with the help of Columbia University, and many of the ideas of the Frankfurt writers were disseminated within the United States. According to various critics, the two Frankfurt School writers to have had the most impact in terms of promoting what later came to be known as “PC culture” in the U.S. were Theodor Adorno and especially Herbert Marcuse. During the 1950s, Adorno and some of his colleagues gained widespread popularity with the publication of their seminal work *The Authoritarian Personality*, a study that sought to identify the psychological and social conditions that made people in the West receptive to fascistic, ethnocentric rhetoric and practices. Adorno and his colleagues found that people with an authoritarian personality tend to have a dualistic conception of the world (i.e., right versus wrong, us versus them, etc.), and, as such, were more likely to submit to authority and display hostility towards minority groups. Adorno argued that such personalities are most common among people who grow up under affectionless, demanding and ultra-strict parents who fill their children with insecurities and anger. Many conservatives regard Adorno’s work as a direct attack on traditional Christian values and family structures and an attempt to delegitimize conservatism by associating conservative principles (e.g., strict parenting, conventionalism, sexual modesty, a rejection of moral relativism, etc.) with simple-mindedness and bigotry. According to these critics, the presumed tendency among PC leftists in the West to accuse anyone who challenges their leftist-progressive views as “racist” or “fascist” can be traced to Adorno’s work (e.g., Lind 2000; Williams 2016).

By the 1960s, another Frankfurt School writer, Herbert Marcuse, became widely popular among student activists in the U.S. and Western Europe. As stated by Douglas Kellner, critical theorists such as Marcuse “radicalized many young students, and . . . helped create an environment in which radical theory and politics could thrive” (Kellner 1984, 210). In fact, Marcuse has often been described as the “father of the New Left.” He drew from both Hegelian Marxism and Freudian psychoanalytical principles to

explore how patterns of inequality and repression in Western capitalist societies went beyond class struggle and were structured into the new economic, political and cultural realities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of Marcuse's central arguments was that the prevailing consumerist culture in modern Western societies flattens discourse and fosters conformity by discouraging spontaneity, imagination, and alternatives to the dominant order and the inequalities that are structured therein. In effect, under such conditions, it becomes very difficult to negate the system in socially or linguistically recognizable ways. The end result is a repressive "one dimensional" existence that undercuts the possibility for alternative, more fulfilling forms of living under more equitable social relations.

The implications of Marcuse's thinking are very clear; that is, human liberation and the solutions to society's problems demands a negation of the dominant order and the need to imagine alternatives to the current system. The student movements of the 1960s attempted to do precisely this with their rejection of war, racism, patriarchy, and other forms of state violence and human oppression. Those on the Right, of course, saw such efforts as attempts to sabotage Western civilization. In his 1966 campaign for California Governor, for example, Ronald Reagan condemned student activists as "filthy speech advocates" interested in promoting anarchy and undermining decency in the name of "academic freedom" (History Now 2017). Such shenanigans, according to Reagan and others on the Right, could not be tolerated, as they represent a threat to Western values. For his part, Marcuse called for "repressive tolerance," or an intolerance towards ideas of the Right and increased tolerance to those on the Left. While the implied break from "neutrality" is often regarded as controversial, for Marcuse, when tolerance is "neutral" and granted equal weight to both sides of the political spectrum, the status quo is left intact, as such tolerance is "practiced by the rulers as well as by the ruled, by the lords as well as by the peasants, by the sheriffs as well as by their victims" (Marcuse 1965, 84). Accordingly, Marcuse called for intolerance of ideas, values, and actions that supported what he regarded as an oppressive system (i.e. Western modern societies under capitalism).

The controversy associated with Marcuse's concept of repressive tolerance continues to this day and is at the heart of current debates surrounding PC. As has been widely reported in the media, in recent years, on college campuses throughout much of the United States, individuals with Right-wing or conservative viewpoints—from White Identitarian Richard Spencer; to conservative commentators such as Ben Shapiro and Ann Coulter; to provocateurs like Milo Yiannopoulos; to academics such as Jordan Peterson, Nicholas Christakis, and Charles Murray—have been

confronted, and, in some cases, prevented from speaking at universities by what are often referred to as angry “PC students” who refuse to even engage with any viewpoints/positions that clash with their own leftist convictions or offend their identities. In the eyes of many conservatives (and even many liberals such as Sam Harris and Bill Maher), these are clear examples of how PC is a corrupt ideology that undermines freedom of speech and silences unpopular or “uncomfortable” perspectives. Here again, it is precisely a backlash against this sort of censorship that made so many Americans receptive to the offensive, “in your face” rhetoric of Donald Trump.

### **PC, Postmodernism, and Marxism: from Relativism to Tyranny**

Another central intellectual influence underlying what is known today as PC lies in the so-called “linguistic turn” in philosophy and literary criticism—e.g. a movement associated with deconstruction, or, more generally, “postmodernism” (Choi and Murphy 1992). Although there has been a great deal of debate about what is philosophically meant by postmodernism since the 1980s, its most basic tenet lies in the assumption that what is understood as “truth” or “reality” is necessarily contingent, rooted in linguistic habits, and hence open to different interpretations. To borrow from Jacques Derrida, reality is akin to a “text” that is continuously read and interpreted, and hence open to being reinterpreted and rewritten (Derrida 1976). What this suggests is that there is no universal understanding of reality or “metanarrative” that can be considered timeless, fixed, or purely objective (Lyotard 1984). This is because human beings do not have a “God’s eye view of the world,” as they are inevitably limited by their own experiences, perceptions, vocabularies, and interpretations. Postmodernism, in this sense, breaks from the dualism that has dominated much of the Western intellectual tradition, whereby there is a presumed separation between subjectivity and objectivity (Murphy 1989). Stated simply, people must necessarily interpret or give meaning to the world as they attempt to make it intelligible, and thus reality is never a “pure” construct (i.e., reality and interpretation are intertwined). Applied to the social realm, this break from dualism implies that society and all social facts are *not* constitutive of a reality *sui generis* but rather amount to little more than jointly constructed phenomena (i.e., social constructions) that, far from being universal or ahistorical, are predicated on shared meanings or assumptions that are variegated, mutable, and contextually determined.

Rather than simply an academic exercise, this critique advanced by postmodernists has profound political implications. Indeed, throughout much of Western history, relations of inequality and oppression have typically been justified by making claims to some pure or “universal” truth associated with nature, biology, God, or science. Thus, for example, white supremacy, patriarchy, and heteronormativity are all systems that have been, at one time or another, legitimized under the assumption that they are biological realities rooted in a “divine” or “natural” order. From this perspective, patterns associated with whites dominating blacks, or men dominating women, or homosexuals being regarded as pathological reprobates, are not assumed to be predicated on any ideology or political agenda but rather constitute part of a universalistic structure—i.e., one predicated on “truths” that are natural, permanent, and objective. Postmodernists attack this idea of timeless, non-contingent bases for truth, knowledge, and order not to undermine reality but to: (1) emphasize the idea that all reality is inextricably tied to human experiences, decisions, and interpretations and hence open to different possibilities; (2) delegitimize the idea that some identities, cultures, or experiences are inherently or “naturally” more valuable than others; and (3) critique any reified bases for “truth” and order on which structures of domination and oppression can be justified. Subsequent to the abandonment of a dualistic understanding of reality, there is no universal or purely objective, non-contestable basis of knowledge on which to legitimize things like racial supremacy, cultural superiority, or essentialist gender categories that restrict human identity to “biological facts.” All that is left are competing horizons of knowledge that must come into dialogue. Postmodernism, in this sense, opens the possibility for multiculturalism, diversity, and equity.

Not surprisingly, critics of postmodernism have a very different view. Because of its emphasis on power differentials and claim that reality is a social-political rather than a “pure” construct, postmodernism is understood by many of its critics as another outgrowth of the strand of Marxism that is currently at the heart of PC. As suggested by Jordan Peterson, for example, political correctness constitutes a union between postmodernism and neo (i.e., cultural) Marxism (Peterson 2017). Peterson and other critics hold that because postmodernism represents an attack on truth and universal values, this intellectual movement is driven by a corrupt, subversive agenda to cease power behind a façade of virtue, empathy, tolerance, equity, social justice, or multiculturalism. Anything that deviates from this agenda—which is presumably being promoted in government, the media, popular culture, businesses, and, perhaps most notably, universities—is deemed “politically incorrect.” Political correctness, in this

sense, enforces the presumed evils of postmodernism and cultural Marxism, and encourages two central, and, in some ways, contradictory outcomes.

First, by challenging concepts such as universal truth and objectivity, PC encourages a form of extreme relativism that undermines the necessary transcendent, objective moral standards on which to differentiate right from wrong, good from evil, or civility from barbarism. As an example, PC attempts to enforce the sort of radical diversity and egalitarianism associated with postmodernism by emphasizing the assumption that no culture or society is inherently better than any other. Because there are no pure, universal standards on which to evaluate the behaviors of all people, in all cultures, and across historical periods, all we can do is try to understand (and perhaps judge) such behaviors on the basis of the local conditions, value systems, meanings, and assumptions that are operative. The widely used phrase about how “a terrorist for some people might be a freedom fighter for others” is a clear example of this. Yet critics contend that PC and its ideological engines (i.e., postmodernism and neo-Marxism) lead to a type of society in which morally reprehensible behavior common in non-Western cultures, such as genital mutilation, honor killings, public executions, and other atrocities, are tolerated in the name multiculturalism and equality. Furthermore, because all cultures are equally valuable, expressing a preference for Western cultures and values is demonized as racist or ethnocentric. As such, the sort of relativism advanced by PC represents an outright attack not only on truth, objectivity, and human dignity, but also on other quintessentially Western, Enlightenment ideals associated with neutral justice, impartial criticism, and advancement based on merit rather than race, sex, or ethnic origin. Political correctness, in this sense, erodes the fabric of society by eviscerating the standards that uphold Western civilization.

A second (almost paradoxical) outcome that is often attributed to PC by its critics has to do with advancing a series of identity-based, moralistic impositions that are anathema to open debate and independent thinking. Because of the emphasis on social justice and giving voice to groups of people who have been presumably oppressed, marginalized, or silenced, those associated with PC are often charged by critics with engaging in a type of identity politics that silences and/or demonizes any viewpoint or behavior that does not support or corroborate the “victim status” of such groups (e.g., racial and ethnic minorities, women, homosexuals, transsexuals, etc.). In effect, when someone says anything critical about individuals who are women, homosexuals, transsexuals, or racial/ethnic minorities, they are essentially violating PC orthodoxy (even though they might be “correct” or justified in their criticisms) and

sanctioned with stigmatizing labels such as racist, bigot, misogynist, or homophobe. Similarly, any viewpoint that challenges that validity of concepts such as multiculturalism, white privilege, female subordination, gender fluidity, equity, affirmative action, or social justice is typically met with ridicule and/or fervent hostility. Considering all this, it is not difficult to understand why many critics regard PC as a form of totalitarianism that Bruce G. Charlton describes as follows:

Just as in the cruder totalitarianism of the mid-twentieth century, PC has created a population that lives in fear: fear of being denounced and losing everything—fear of committing (or indeed merely being accused of) a thought crime or uttering a hate fact for which there is no defense; fear of the sanctions which range from social ostracism, through loss of job, financial penalties, up to directed mob violence and imprisonment (Charlton 2015, iii).

Indeed, particularly in today's age of social media and unprecedented public scrutiny, making comments that are deemed "offensive" can lead to dramatic consequences. Critics, therefore, contend that far from inviting a variety of different perspectives, PC constrains discourse on the basis of leftist-progressive parameters that cannot be transgressed without compromising one's reputation, livelihood, and well-being.

## **Defending Political Correctness in the Era of Trump**

While the criticisms directed against PC noted above are worthy of serious analysis and discussion, readers should also consider the following six points. First, many of the aims and ideas underlying efforts currently dismissed as "PC" (e.g., challenging injustice and promoting a more equitable type of diversity) are intended to sustain inclusiveness, fairness, and democracy. As much as identity politics and the current struggles against oppression and injustice—as illustrated by activist groups such as Black Lives Matter, Antifa, and others—are often demonized as examples of PC tyranny, the argument might also be made that these efforts are a vitally important continuation of the movements from the 1960s and 1970s, including the Civil Rights Movement, the Feminist Movement, the Gay Rights Movement, and other movements that sought to restore the humanity and dignity of marginalized groups in a society where their identities, experiences, and realities were not reflected. In light of significant demographic shifts in the United States and the backlash that has been witnessed against these changes (which aided the rise of Donald Trump), such efforts are particularly important today.

Second, many of those dismissed as “social justice warriors” are not simply hypersensitive quacks whose sole aim is to subvert free speech and encourage a leftist ideological lockdown, nor are they simply coddled and infantilized “snowflakes” who are too easily outraged by offensive language or over-reacting to some innocuous misrepresentation of someone’s identity, culture and/or experience. Instead, and consistent with neo-Marxism and postmodernism, many of these activists accused of being “too PC” actually emphasize how language and culture shape social reality and normalize structures of power and inequality. As such, they seek to extricate the legacy of classicism, racism, sexism, and homophobia from current language, norms, value systems, policies, and practices that, for too long, have been regarded as natural or universal. The point, in effect, is to challenge and eventually abandon terms, attitudes, beliefs, positions, policies, and practices/behaviors that presuppose any kind of inferiority, abnormality, or “otherness” among those who deviate from a white, Christian, middle class, hetero-patriarchal norm. As history has repeatedly shown, when societies/communities fail to engage in this sort of criticism, a process of dehumanization takes place that legitimizes violence and human rights violations against vulnerable groups of people.

Third, it might be argued that the need for deep social criticism has been heightened under the current Trump presidency. According to FBI data, the number of hate crimes reached a 5 year high in 2016, spiking towards the end of the year, soon after Trump’s presidential victory. These data show that 58.9% of the victims were targeted because of their race or ethnicity; 21.1% because of their religion (anti-Muslim hate crimes increased by 20% compared to 2015); and 16.7% because of their sexual orientation (FBI Releases 2016 Hate Crime Statistics). While it is difficult to establish a cause and effect relationship between this increase in hate crimes and Donald Trump’s political ascendancy, the Southern Poverty Law Center reports that the spike is likely related to Trump’s campaign (Barrouquere 2017). Indeed, various critics have argued that Trump’s overtly racist messages, advocacy for violence at his rallies, and continuous calls to discard all political correctness might have emboldened some of his supporters to engage in overt bigotry and violence, including hate crimes (Mathias 2017). Many would also argue that efforts to counteract the normalization of such violent bigotry is a key aim among activists who are often dismissed as defenders of PC.

Fourth, as much as critics contend that activists associated with PC are too obsessed with offensive language that, in and of itself, cannot cause any harm (a criticism captured by the popular children’s rhyme “sticks and stones may hurt my bones but words can never hurt me”), the fact of the

matter is that words *can* be violent, as speech, particularly the type that is not simply offensive but abusive, can have a powerful effect on the social, emotional, and psychological well-being of people. Social scientific research shows how racist, sexist, and anti-gay hate speech in public places (e.g., speech that specifically targets and overtly degrades and dehumanizes specific groups of people based on their identity) is correlated with harmful social and psychological outcomes, even when such speech does not directly lead to physical violence (e.g., Nielsen 2002; Leets 2002; Gelber & McNamara 2016). Similarly, neuroscientists and psychologist Lisa Feldman Barrett addresses the “free speech” controversy on U.S. college campuses, and suggests that while speech that might be regarded as “offensive” should be *permitted* within the context of an open debate, when speech becomes abusive (as when White supremacists argue that black people are fundamentally inferior, or when someone like Milo Yiannopoulos humiliates rape victims by claiming that the alleged “rape culture” on college campuses is a myth), this encourages not simply “debate” but a type of hostile environment where minority groups are forced to worry about their safety and subjected to long stretches of crippling stress that compromises their mental and even physical health (Barrett 2017). Furthermore, in his book *The Harm in Hate Speech*, law professor Jeremy Waldron compellingly argues that the right to “free speech” should not be used as a tool to legitimize the defamation of vulnerable minority groups, as this encourages discrimination, weakens social bonds, and undermines the public good (Waldron 2012). Taking all this into account, one might legitimately argue that protesting, confronting, or even shutting down provocateurs and hatemongers on U.S. college campuses is not an attempt to undermine free speech but rather a necessary effort to ensure the safety and well-being of susceptible minority groups. Considering the United States currently has a president who consistently uses language that millions of people consider threatening, abusive, and supportive of violence and bigotry, the need to thwart hate speech cannot be dismissed as “hyper-sensitive” silliness or condemned as an attack on free speech.

Fifth, while the term political correctness, particularly since the 1990s, is typically used by those on the right to criticize the “excesses” of the liberal-progressive Left, there is also a Right-wing political correctness that has become particularly discernible in the era of Trump. In fact, despite all of Trump’s talk about the need to do away with PC, the president himself has consistently displayed a type of Right-wing orthodoxy that is just as puritanical as what many on the Right accuse the PC Left of espousing. Thus, for example, when Trump suggests that anyone who burns the U.S. flag should lose their citizenship or go to jail (Wagner 2016); or when he