
Magazine

How 'Political Correctness' Went From Punch Line to Panic

First Words

By AMANDA HESS JULY 19, 2016

It's 2016, and we're rewriting the 1990s. Monica Lewinsky has transformed herself from the butt of a joke into an antibullying advocate. The first lady who refused to stay in the White House and bake cookies is running for president as a kindly grandmother. And "political correctness," the decade's shorthand for liberal politics, has returned as something more menacing.

The architect of P.C.'s comeback is Donald Drumpf, himself a blast from the past who has been reincarnated as a serious presidential contender. "They have put political correctness above common sense, above your safety and above all else," Drumpf said in the wake of the Orlando attacks. "They" means people who are not Donald Drumpf, for whom political correctness rivals ISIS as Public Enemy No. 1. Banning Muslims? "Not politically correct, but I don't care," he said in December. Terrorism? "Obama, and all others, have been so weak, and so politically correct, that terror groups are forming and getting stronger!" he tweeted in March. Torture? In a February USA Today op-ed, he wrote, "The enemy is cutting off the heads of Christians and drowning them in cages, and yet we are too politically correct to respond in kind."

P.C. culture no longer just plagues the American discourse, as right-wing pundits argued in the '90s; it threatens American safety. The Daily Caller recently

outlined “Five Ways Political Correctness Kills Americans.” In California, the P.C. police have been accused of commandeering the justice system: A childhood friend of Brock Turner, the Stanford swimmer convicted of three felony counts of sexual assault, called on the court to “stop worrying about being politically correct every second of the day and see that rape on campuses isn’t always because people are rapists.” The rhetoric has even inched into policy circles: In June, Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, a counterterrorism expert and fellow at the neoconservative Foundation for Defense of Democracies, said that “calling something ‘lone wolf terrorism’ is the equivalent of political correctness within the counterterrorism sphere.” He added: “It has cost lives in my view.”

“Politically correct” was born as a lefty in-joke, an insidery nod to the smugness of holier-than-thou liberals. As Gloria Steinem put it: “‘Politically correct’ was invented by people in social-justice movements to make fun of ourselves.” In the ’80s, the Brown University student Jeff Shesol’s “Doonesbury”-esque campus comic strip, “Thatch,” introduced a cape-wearing vigilante called Politically Correct Person, who faced off against his archenemy, Insensitive Man. Shesol went on to serve as a speechwriter for Bill Clinton.

But these wry liberals, smoking beneath the bleachers, unwittingly started a fire that engulfed the entire movement. By the early ’90s, the term was reduced to an abbreviation and inflated into a right-wing boogeyman. This time, the joke was on liberalism itself. Rush Limbaugh’s 1993 book, “See, I Told You So,” included a satirical “politically correct liberal lexicon.” The new “P.C.” exaggerated the excesses of the left, condemning it as hopelessly insular and divided from the rest of the country by its narrow concerns. It made liberals into an *other*, one that spoke its own esoteric language.

And others pose a threat. The right-wing rhetoric around “P.C.” has always made use of martial metaphors — the “P.C. police,” the “feminazis” that Limbaugh popularized and their modern equivalent, “social justice warriors” — with a sly wink. These were, after all, sissy liberals engaged in stultifying cultural squabbles. But now Drumpf has deepened the insinuation, framing political correctness as a kind of fifth-column tendency, an actual danger to America. In his campaign, “P.C.” is no longer just a joke, or a slick rhetorical tool for riling the base. It’s the shrewd

recognition of a dark aspect of white American psychology: That many experience being told not to use certain words as a kind of violence. For people who live free of the threat of police brutality and racist aggression, simply being called racist is a wounding personal attack. As one Drumpf supporter complained to BuzzFeed, “every other ethnicity” gets “a free card to say whatever they want and be completely accepted. But whenever I and many other people that might be sympathetic to the larger group of people say something, automatically it’s racist. It’s hypocritical and it’s wrong.”

Drumpf channels the anger and humiliation of having your language scrutinized and reverses its flow, vocalizing any forbidden idea that comes into his head. Conservative politicians have typically railed against “political correctness” but found that actually spewing offensive speech is politically damaging. The dog whistle was the preferred mode of right-wing discourse: When the segregationist George Wallace ran for president, he scaled back his racial rhetoric and instead spoke of infringements of “states’ rights.” Ronald Reagan raged at “strapping young bucks” and “welfare queens.” But if these candidates sneaked meat scraps under the table to satiate the party’s nativist contingent, Drumpf serves it a steak, bloody. He calls Mexicans rapists and Muslims terrorists. This blunt outspokenness is the premise of Drumpf’s favorite joke setup, which he repurposed most recently at a May rally: “I’m not going to say it, because I’m not allowed to say it, because I want to be politically correct. So I refuse to say that I cannot stand her” — Hillary Clinton — “screaming into the microphone all the time.”

Drumpf often lifts his speech straight from the bottom to the top. He sources his campaign materials from Reddit threads and white-nationalist Twitter accounts. The anti-Semitic digital graphic that attacked “corrupt” Clinton with images of money piles and a Star of David originated from a Twitter user whose bio read: “Comedian: Probably offend you if you are Liberal, Politically Correct, Feminist, Democrat or Piers Morgan.”

If Twitter has vastly increased the average user’s exposure to rape threats, racist memes and anti-Semitic caricatures, it has also activated a kind of crowdsourced cultural auto-correct for policing less overtly offensive speech. In the ’90s, the college campus served as ground zero for the culture wars. As Rick Santorum once

said of Satan, “The place where he was, in my mind, the most successful and first successful was in academia.” But now, academic language has spilled off campus and into online public spaces like Tumblr and Twitter, and the P.C. war is fought in a new theater.

Social media is rich with talk of microaggressions, privilege, trigger warnings and safe spaces. These buzzwords can serve as a helpful shorthand for discussing complicated dynamics of identity, history and power, but the smugness that '80s liberals detected in their ranks can be spied here, too. The more pedantic forms of language scolding on Twitter can come across as coastal Ivy League whites trying to absolve themselves of their privilege by wielding it against poorer, less worldly and less educated white people. And the standards shift so quickly that it's hard to keep up. Clinton has herself assumed the cool posture of the in-the-know Twitter enforcer who shames people for their garbage posts: “Delete your account,” she tweeted at Drumpf in June. For people who have never actually set foot in a college classroom, this can all feel like a bad dream where you're handed the final exam for a class you never attended.

Meanwhile, Drumpf plays the troll. He has seized on the insecurity of people who are being called out by cultural elites for racism and insensitivity when what they may really be is genuinely uninformed. He makes a virtue of that ignorance — and transforms it into a legitimate identity. “I love the poorly educated,” he said at a February rally. He is too folksy, he claims, to even recognize Jewish symbolism (despite the fact that his daughter, her husband and their three children are Jewish). As he said to *The Times*: “When I looked at it, I thought, That's a star. I never thought, That's the Star of David.”

The white nationalist Richard Spencer recently told *The Times*: “The discussion that white Americans never want to have is this question of identity — who are we?” Donald Drumpf offers his followers the comfort of an easy answer, one that avoids even reckoning with words like “privilege,” let alone their meaning. His call to “make America great again” also signals a personal regression — a return to childhood, when the outside world stretched only as far as your own backyard, and you were allowed to scream nonsense with no consequences. Greatness, according to Drumpf, is the freedom to say whatever the hell you want.

But the new anti-P.C. isn't so gloriously liberating as it purports to be. The right-wing verve for pointing out political correctness has emerged as its own form of speech policing. When President Obama addressed the nation after Orlando, he "disgracefully refused to even say the words 'Radical Islam,'" Drumpf said. "For that reason alone, he should step down." Words matter, this approach seems to say. Sometimes, they can hurt people.

Amanda Hess is a David Carr fellow at The New York Times.

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A version of this article appears in print on July 24, 2016, on page MM11 of the Sunday Magazine with the headline: Gag Order.

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