

CULTURE IN THE CONTEXT OF “POLITICAL CORRECTNESS”

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Abstract. The present text (part of the dissertation with the same title, defended at the University of Bucharest, Faculty of Letters, Department of Cultural Studies, June 2022) comprises the theoretical delimitations of the term “political correctness”, including at the same time a connection of the phenomenon to the field of cultural studies, emphasizing the relevance and topicality of the discussion/debate in the context of the delimited research area, with the aim of understanding and examining literary reception from a cultural, political and ideological point of view. As an interdisciplinary field, Cultural Studies investigates the relationship between society and culture, the ways in which changes in society affect both the production and consumption of culture. Although we treat *political correctness* as an eminently cultural issue, we will dwell on the ideological implications of the trend, in particular on how the trend is understood (and perpetuated) by the two main political orientations: the right and the left – the right wing condemns political correctness, while the left defends it, justifying its mechanisms. Ultimately, we will capture and include an essential problematization by considering that political intervention in culture summarizes the formulas of *political correctness*.

Keywords: *Culture; Politically Correct – Political Correctness; Ideology; Cultural Studies*

The Concept of Political Correctness. Theoretical Perspectives and Historical Background

Such a controversial term as “political correctness” would seem difficult to define and, at the same time, to place in a historical context, given that it has become a commonplace (although the most frequently used term is the adjectival one – politically correct, because the referents do not generally refer to the concept, but to an element that categorizes certain structural units or situations as politically correct). Involving the ideological, *political correctness*, par excellence a cultural issue, is generally discussed according to the two main political directions: right

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and left. We will highlight the way in which their exponents start a mutual attack and position political correctness as the prerogative of the opposite camp, the arguments being varied. Following the precepts of geopolitical analysis, we must not lose sight of the place and space in which the authors of *political correctness* studies are ideologically confined, but also of their interests, be they strictly academic, research or political, to influence public opinion in a particular direction, in the very sense underlined by Bruce G. Charlton¹, according to whom neutrality does not exist, given that man, inwardly, cannot be impartial.

In *Political Correctness. A History of Semantics and Culture*², Geoffrey Hughes selects three definitions of the concept, all from different perspectives. First, the neutral and official, dictionary definition: "conformity to a liberal or radical body of opinion on social issues, characterized by support for accepted views and rejection of language and behaviour considered discriminatory or offensive."³ The following two definitions have an added rhetorical charge, and it is clear on which side of the fence the authors stand. Doris Lessing – a British writer known for the frankness when expressing her views in discussions of political and social issues – associates *political correctness* with left-wing ideology, vehemently condemning this form of "conformity": "The most powerful mental tyranny within what we call the free world is Political Correctness, which is as obvious and pervasive as it is invisible as poison gas, for its influences are far from the source, manifesting themselves as a general intolerance"⁴.

In defence of *political correctness* comes, not surprisingly, the left-wing perspective. Clare Short, a Labour politician, calls the concept "an invention of far-right forces designed to defend their right to be racist, to treat women in a degrading way and to be vile about gay people." Furthermore, C. Short labels even people considered "Politically Correct" as an invention, which would be nothing more than a fabrication created precisely to be attacked.⁵

On the same note, in the introduction to *Beyond Political Correctness. Toward the Inclusive University*, Stephen Richer and Lorna Weir blame neo-conservatism for the negative connotation they attribute to the concept. Referring specifically to the Canadian university space, the authors criticize the way and manner in which feminist and anti-racist initiatives are received as "forms of tyranny that have destroyed academic freedom and the concept of merit"⁶. According to them, while *political correctness* was initially perceived as a "mockery" of leftism and rigid excesses, the neoconservative view labels it as "the successor to communism"⁷. Later, it becomes absolutely clear that everything that the right dismantles is, for

¹ Bruce G. Charlton, *Thought Prison. The Fundamental Nature of Political Correctness*, University of Buckingham Press, 2015.

² Geoffrey Hughes, *Political Correctness: A History of Semantics and Culture*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

³ *Oxford Dictionary of New Words*, 1997, *apud* Geoffrey Hughes, *quoted work*, p. 13.

⁴ Doris Lessing, "Censorship," in *Time Bites*. London: Fourth Estate, 2004, *apud* Geoffrey Hughes, *quoted work*, p. 13.

⁵ Clare Short: *Guardian*, 1995, *apud* Geoffrey Hughes, *quoted work*, p. 13.

⁶ Stephen Richer and Lorna Weir (ed.), *Beyond Political Correctness. Toward the Inclusive University*, second edition, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018, p. 3.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

St. Richer and L. Weir, a form of human rights advocacy: “recycling hyperbolic anti-communist rhetoric, neoconservatives denounce human rights initiatives as forms of intolerant bigotry and oppression”.⁸ The main argument that St. Richer and L. Weir invoke in defence of *political correctness*, and which in fact constitutes the basic thrust of the volume, is the model of the “inclusive university”⁹, initiated as early as the 1960s with the expansion of universities and colleges, which led to greater inclusion of the working and middle classes. The authors also discuss statistical data on the ratio of women enrolled in university education, which has increased significantly in Canada for twenty years, from 38.5% in 1972 to 54% in 1992.

In the above-mentioned volume, Dorothy E. Smith introduces the phrase “ideological code”¹⁰ as a form of control over public discourse. Once established ideological codes are self-generating and self-perpetuating, organizing what we think, speak, write and what appears on television. D. E. Smith warns that this code does not represent a precise, concrete category, and therefore does not have an exact formula for manifestation. Rather, the code is a generator of procedures for selecting syntax and vocabulary when we speak and write (and thus, send messages), for interpreting what is written and said, and for relating discursive subjects.¹¹ Therefore, the ideological code is not, argues D. E. Smith, a “social organization”¹², but is itself a “social organizer”¹³. The power of such codes lies in the fact that people pick them up and use them without, more often than not, understanding their meaning. The code becomes a kind of “currency” that operates for the benefit of those who put it into circulation, but its origin and ideological “intention” are not visible.

Precisely, Dorothy E. Smith associates *political correctness* with an ideological code that exposes the resistance of conservative opposition to the loss of authority in matters of gender and imperialism. Karl Kroeber, professor of comparative literature at Columbia University, opposes “the constructive reductionism of critics who substitute a dogmatic system with its opposite – for example, substituting imperialism for anti-imperialism or replacing the canon that excludes black women with a canon that excludes white men”.¹⁴ In contrast to the leftist view, Kroeber does not see anti-imperialism or the reconfiguration of the canon as necessary “corrections” to the wrongs of history, but as “extensions of the contrastive mentality of the Cold War”.¹⁵ It is “positive discrimination”, i.e. “the violation of majority rights in favour of minority representatives”.¹⁶

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ Karl Kroeber, *Ecological Literary Criticism: Romantic Imagining and the Biology of the Mind*. New York: Columbia UP, 1994, p. 140, *apud* Cara Cilano and Elizabeth DeLoughrey: *Against Authenticity: Global Knowledges and Postcolonial Ecocriticism*, in *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, no. 14.1, 2007, p. 74.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ Galina Țurcan, “Multiculturalism și corectitudine politică”. *Teoria și practica administrării publice*, p. 185, URL: http://dspace.aap.gov.md/bitstream/handle/123456789/1703/Turcan_G.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y, accessed on 14.12.2021.

By associating *political correctness* with a form of Marxism, William S. Lind could easily be labelled, especially from the perspective of leftist exponents, as ultraconservative. In the contextual data of this chapter we will naturally align his perspective with what *political correctness* entails. Thus, along the lines proposed by W. S. Lind¹⁷, the effort to translate Marxism from economics into culture began in the 1920s with the writings of the communist Antonio Gramsci. In 1923 in Germany, a group of Marxists founded a dedicated institute, The Institute of Social Research, known as "the Frankfurt School". A combination of Marx and Freud, to which linguistic influences were later added to create 'critical theory' and 'deconstruction'. These in turn influenced educational theory and, through higher education institutions, gave rise to what we now call 'political correctness'. W. S. Lind is firm and uncompromising in his attempt to demonstrate that the "ground zero" of the concept he refers to and is concerned with (here) is Karl Marx himself.

The author is by no means the only one who resorts to such an inference, and the debate is also valid in the Romanian cultural space. Dana Buzura-Gagniuc, for example, in an article symptomatically entitled "Political Correctness. Today's version of the Bed of Procrustes"¹⁸, calls the link between *political correctness* and the Frankfurt School "indissoluble", and "ideologically speaking, political correctness is the concrete manifestation of cultural Marxism, which aims to change mentalities and, implicitly, an irreversible change in our lives".¹⁹ This paradigm shift, which Dana Buzura-Gagniuc describes, has set out "to deconstruct, to demolish the old world, based on tradition, putting in place what many theorists today call "the new inquisition"²⁰ – a way of thinking marked by the limits set by *political correctness*. After all, as the author states bluntly, the concept is "apparently benign"²¹ only "at first glance"²², for it is in fact similar "to Marxism and everything that goes with it, from the loss of freedom of expression to the overthrow of the social order and total control of thought".²³

Revisiting W. S. Lind's view, the most obvious common ground between economic and cultural Marxism is the vision of a "classless society"²⁴ with equal conditions, or, in Dana Buzura-Gagniuc's formulation, a "cultural and social levelling"²⁵ of normality. This would be a contradiction in terms of human nature, and the explanation is simple: because people are different, they become unequal, and a standardizing vision can only be imposed by force. Thus, the first point in common between economic and cultural Marxism is that "both are

¹⁷ William S. Lind (ed.), *"Political Correctness": A Short History of an Ideology*. The Freed Congress Foundation, 2004.

¹⁸ Dana Buzura-Gagniuc: "Corectitudinea politică. Varianta de azi a Patului lui Procrust", *Revista Cultura*, no. 2, 2019, pp. 30-39, URL: https://revistacultura.ro/pdf/Cultura_598_2_19-web.pdf, accessed on 14.12.2021.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 32.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ William S. Lind, *quoted work*, p. 5.

²⁵ Dana Buzura-Gagniuc, *quoted art.*

totalitarian ideologies”²⁶. In the field of culture, this is visible through attacks on freedom of expression, the press or even thought.

A second similarity is that both have single-factor²⁷ explanations of history: while “classical Marxism” argues that all history was determined by ownership of the means of production, cultural Marxism explains history through groups with power over other groups.

A third common point: both versions of Marxism declare that certain groups are good and others are *a priori* bad²⁸. For the constructs of “classical Marxism”, workers are the good guys and capital owners are the bad guys. Culturally, political correctness defines minority groups as good and majority groups – bad.

The fourth intersection in W. S. Lind’s argument concerns expropriation.²⁹ If economic Marxists, once in power, expropriate bourgeois property by arbitrarily attaching it to the state, cultural Marxists penalize those with different opinions and privilege the groups they favour.

A final knot deduced by W. S. Lind is that the method of analysis of Marxism is constructed in such a way as to confirm the correctness of the ideology in any given situation.³⁰ As far as the cultural variant is concerned, linguistic analysis – deconstruction – takes precedence, which, according to W. S. Lind, is the type of analysis that tends to show that a particular text illustrates the oppression of minority groups.

The author not only theorizes the concept, but also launches it as a kind of manifesto, calling for action against political correctness (or “cultural Marxism”³¹). In doing so, he points out a danger: it is not enough to criticize political correctness, because it is used to tolerating such gestures, but tolerance is not genuine, gratuitous, but used in disguise to disarm its opponents, to appear less threatening than it is.³² In 2004, when the volume coordinated by W. S. Lind appeared, “cultural Marxism did not yet hold total power”, but since then the phenomenon has become increasingly present, with a rhetoric that is extremely cleverly constructed so that “it does not appear totalitarian until victory is assured”.³³ Raymond V. Raehn also warns against the “charm” with which the advocates of political correctness address the public, using flattering terms such as “tolerance”³⁴ and “diversity”³⁵ (a detailed discussion of this is the subject of the second chapter of this paper).

The fact is that such well-crafted discourse is more likely to convince the minorities it protects. For instance, in the *Autonomous Magazine*, incidentally or not, a black author defends *political correctness*, invoking strictly the official

²⁶ William S. Lind, *quoted work*.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

³² *Ibidem*.

³³ *Ibidem*.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

rhetoric of current non-discrimination policy, i.e. that based on emotions: the call for acceptance, empathy and even love. There is no trace of ideology or attempt to identify the real sources of the concept in Michael Latchman's discourse³⁶, for the simple reason that he has no need of them, the official rhetoric being sufficient and, more importantly, convenient. In the named understanding, *political correctness* is "the result of mental evolution and understanding" of human nature, this "evolution" referring to the acceptance of otherness as we become more exposed to the presence of individuals from different backgrounds. M. Latchman is aware that "love" and "acceptance" are universal values, against which it is difficult to take an offensive position.³⁷

Beyond the above-mentioned attempts to depoliticize the concept, it undoubtedly remains highly ideologically charged, the current meaning of the term "political correctness" having undergone a shift. Geoffrey Hughes succeeds in identifying its first occurrence, namely in a legal context: in 1793, in a Supreme Court case, when the judge uses "The United States" instead of "The people of the United States" and the comment "This is not politically correct"³⁸ appears. Except that here, of course, the meaning is literal, "politically correct" being explained by G. Hughes as "politically accurate".³⁹

G. Hughes resorts to superimposing the modern meaning of the expression communist doctrine, with clear origins in Mao, Trotsky and Liu Shao Chi ("The politically correct line of our party cannot be separated from its organizationally correct line"⁴⁰). At that stage, the term "correctness" already marked "adherence to the Maoist doctrine", and the author gives an example where the named meaning holds a plus-evidence: "When professors and scholars glorify the correctness of Marxism-Leninism, the Communists hope that ordinary people will be more willing to accept the new ideology".⁴¹ Later, the term was extended to Communism in Russia, where in 1933 the verb "to educate" did not mean "to open up the horizon of possibilities", but "to persuade people to adopt the Party's way of thinking".⁴²

Over time, the phrase "politically correct" began to be used ironically. Paul Berman⁴³ is the one who notices the change of tone in the American space, which also implies a shift from "politically correct" to "P. C." The examples⁴⁴ are drawn from the press, from the 1980s to the present day, and the shift from the extremely serious to the ironic tone is explained simplistically by Geoffrey Hughes: in the totalitarian context, political correctness had a serious doctrinal meaning, and once taken up by democratic and liberal society, it became an anomaly, an empty

³⁶ Michael Latchman. "The Irony of Political Correctness", *Autonomous Magazine*, 2014, URL: <https://medium.com/autonomous/the-irony-of-political-correctness-c49dd4c4301e>, accessed on 14.12.2021.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ Geoffrey Hughes, *quoted work*, p. 62.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² *Ibidem*.

⁴³ Paul Berman (ed.), *Debating PC: The Controversy Over Political Correctness on College Campuses*. New York: Laurel Press, 1992, p. 5, *apud* Geoffrey Hughes, *quoted work*.

⁴⁴ 1986 – *New York Times*, May 11; 1992 – *The Economist*, January 11; 2003 – *This Magazine*, February.

formula of conformity open to subversion.⁴⁵ Paradoxically or not, the irony is also the justification that leftists use in countering criticism from conservatives today. Ruth Perry, professor of literature at MIT, considers the “attack” on political correctness an attack on “affirmative action” in academia – that of recruiting students who do not conform to what has always constituted the population of academic institutions: usually white, middle-class, heterosexual and male.⁴⁶ R. Perry argues that the meaning ascribed to political correctness today is confusing and that in academia the phrase “politically correct” has always been used ironically, as a “joke”, to differentiate the New Left camp from the Old Left.⁴⁷

Political Correctness and Cultural Studies

Equally belonging to and being challenged by the political and the ideological, political correctness is eminently a matter of culture, identity and perception, but perhaps even more so in relation to how the cultural product comes to be judged by the norms and criteria of the ideological. The real effect of the phenomenon is not in the affiliation of a critic or art historian, for example, to Marxism, feminism or psychoanalysis, but in the “determined effort to subordinate art to a non-artistic agenda”⁴⁸, to subject it to a grid that negates its aesthetic autonomy from the outset.

Matthew Arnold, quoted by Jeff Johnson, defines a genuine critic as one who exemplifies “a disinterested effort to learn”⁴⁹. But today, in the politically charged context of poststructuralism, “no discourse is disinterested”⁵⁰, Johnson points out. We could identify, in this filtering angle, a precedent in Constantin Dobrogeanu-Gherea’s sociological critique, in his search for causes outside the work. However, unlike Constantin D.-Gherea, who investigated the biographical and historical framework of the author in order to explain the literary text, the approach in the case of relating literature or art to the yardsticks of political correctness is the opposite: from the outside in, from reality to literature.

Of course, literature, as a ‘significant barometer of a society’s level of civilization’,⁵¹ although it presupposes a fictional space, with fictional situations, cannot be completely separated from reality (nor need it be), the context being as important as the text itself. However, judging literature or any other artistic product by the prevalence of patterns of conduct and thought that are increasingly imposed in real life is not far removed from the mechanisms of communist censorship.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 64.

⁴⁶ Kat Chow, “*Politically Correct: the Phrase Has Gone from Wisdom to Weapon*”, *National Public Radio*, December 2016, URL: <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2016/12/14/505324427/politically-correct-the-phrase-has-gone-from-wisdom-to-weapon>, accessed on 15.12.2021.

⁴⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁸ Roger Kimball, *The Rape of the Masters: How Political Correctness Sabotages Art*. New York: Encounter Books, 2005, p. xiv.

⁴⁹ Jeff Johnson, “Literature, Political Correctness and Cultural Equity”. *English Today*, no. 8, pp. 44-47, URL: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0266078400006350, accessed on 15.12. 2021.

⁵⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁵¹ Dana Buzura Gagniuc, *quoted art*.

Cultural studies, an interdisciplinary field at the border area between humanities and social sciences⁵², examines precisely the way changes in society affect both the production and consumption of culture. Political correctness, infiltrated today in all spheres by the rhetoric of non-discrimination, especially at the level of European institutions, aims, according to Raymond V. Raehn, at "the radical overthrow of traditional culture"⁵³, i.e. a paradigm shift based on the deconstruction of the universal system of values, the current tendency being to privilege discussions centred on race, gender or class. Discourse is central to this, as language shapes and is shaped by and through culture. The influence felt is therefore bi-directional: how we think determines what we say and the language we use shapes our mindset.

Codrin Liviu Cuțitaru, in an article published in *Observator Cultural*, describes political correctness as a "mental tool for adapting to the behavioural, psychological and cultural rigours of an open society"⁵⁴, thus confirming the relevance of the cultural component in this context. Beyond the biased discourse of political correctness, C. L. Cuțitaru acknowledges that there are "certain exaggerations" or "excesses" – a "witch hunt", which, in 2004, when the article appeared, he illustrated by legalizing certain "sexual and behavioural aberrations under the umbrella of a false 'freedom of expression'". Well, almost two decades on, the 'witch hunt' has become much more aggressive, even merciless, with forms of culture that do not respect the constraints imposed by this attempt to eliminate discrimination, but which, paradoxically, in turn creates discrimination.

Since we are particularly interested in recent attempts to exclude classic, canonical literary texts, without which universal literature would no longer be the same, it should be stressed that the field of cultural studies complements the literary field in the sense of an absolutely necessary contextualization, given that literature does not emerge from nothing. Thus, a discussion of literary reception from a cultural and even political point of view, with a focus on the tendencies to subject literature (and art in general) to practices that are more a matter of reality, is of interest to both cultural and literary studies.

The Political Intervention on Culture

The synonymy noted by William S. Lind⁵⁵ between political correctness and "cultural Marxism" captures, as a whole, the political-ideological-culture relationship. Insisting on the contribution of the Frankfurt School to the ideological forging of political correctness, the author cites Martin Jay's "semi-official history"⁵⁶

⁵² Stuart Hall, "The Emergence of Cultural Studies and the Crisis of the Humanities". *The Humanities as Social Technology*, vol. 53, 1990, p. 11, URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/778912>, accessed on 15.12.2021.

⁵³ Raymond V. Raehn, *Corectitudinea politica? – "Religia" marxistă a noii Ordini Mondiale*, translated by Irina Bazon, p. 27, *apud* Dana Buzura-Gagniuc, *quoted work*.

⁵⁴ Codrin Liviu Cuțitaru, "Din nou despre corectitudinea politică", in *Observator Cultural*, no. 251, 2004, URL: <https://www.observatorcultural.ro/articol/din-nou-despre-corectitudinea-politica-2/>, accessed on 15.12.2021.

⁵⁵ William S. Lind, *quoted work*.

⁵⁶ Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute for Social Research, 1932-1950*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996, *apud* William S. Lind, *quoted work*, p. 43.

of the Institute for Social Research. According to M. Jay, the central concern of the Institute in the early 1930s was the integration of Marxism into culture through psychoanalysis. In the context and at the time, a set of issues central to the emergence and propagation of political correctness were highlighted: the demand for sexual “liberation” and the targeted assault on patriarchal Western culture.⁵⁷

Theodor Adorno, the Institute’s leading theorist on the problems and philosophy of high culture, believes that, in relation to the repressive acts of bourgeois society, art is “authentic” only if it accurately reflects the alienated society whose product it is. If Th. Adorno despised the “new mass culture”, Walter Benjamin, a leading figure of the Frankfurt School – who, paradoxically, was neither a member of the Institute nor shared its theoretical core – investigated the “progressive potential of politicized, collectivized art”.⁵⁸ W. Benjamin’s perspective was later harmonized with that of the Frankfurt School, Martin Jay summarizing the conceptual conjunction: “The Institute came to feel that the cultural industry subjugated man in ways far more subtle and effective than the primitive methods of domination practiced in previous eras.”⁵⁹

In his summary of Martin Jay’s volume, W. S. Lind warns of the translation of Marxism from the economic sphere to functional-cultural terms, pointing to the “critical theory” of the Frankfurt School as the origin of issues that have become central to political correctness: “racism, sexism and homophobia”.⁶⁰

In *The Idea of a University*, John Henry Newman defined the liberal arts by the very attribute of gratuitous knowledge (in the Kantian spirit of “purposeless finality”). In opposition to these, J. H. Newman delineated “servile arts” as having a specific, immediate purpose. At this terminological point, W. S. Lind is keen to point out that the data with which political correctness operates could easily be categorized as “servile”, its aim being to “advance a political agenda from a position of national power”.⁶¹ The binomial proposed by John Henry Newman is, in fact, an analogue of the autonomy – heteronomy opposition (of art), precisely targeting the relationship between cultural and extra-cultural or literary and extra-literary (the prefix „extra-marking, contextually, the social, political or ideological determination of the cultural or literary product). Sociologically, Gisèle Sapiro⁶² warns against the unbridled use of ideologized perspectives, i.e. the over-emphasis of social determinations, whereby artistic production becomes a mere reflection of social relations. The same logic applies to the political determination of artistic production.

The political intervention in culture is highly visible in academia, as W. S. Lind observes. Essentially, the phenomenon involves the gradual reframing of the curriculum in line with the principles of political correctness. In this regard,

⁵⁷ William S. Lind, *quoted work*, p. 44.

⁵⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 45.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

⁶² Gisèle Sapiro, “Pour une approche sociologique des relations entre littérature et idéologie”, in “L’idéologie en sociologie de la littérature”, *CONTEXTES*, no. 2, 2007, URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/contextes/165>, accessed on 08.02. 2022.

Lind expresses concern about the following point: with the integration of multiculturalism into the American university environment, the Western tradition will no longer be a matter of academic interest. This fear is amplified by the fact that a considerable number of elite universities have already modified their curricula in line with the ideological "demands" of the time. One example is Stanford University itself, which has eliminated a civilization program for newly enrolled students, replacing it with a multicultural program called "Cultures, Ideas and Values"⁶³. At the same time, history is no longer a compulsory subject, and students are offered a series of optional courses called "American Cultures". Culture in academia is thus relativized, and the plural form is instructive in this respect.

Following Jean-François Lyotard's theorization of the "postmodern condition", Richard Feldstein uses the explanation that defines postmodernism as a "condition" rather than an "ideology": ideology refers to a belief system that may or may not be translated into practice, while "condition" marks a profound paradigm shift in fundamental assumptions about the production and dissemination of knowledge.⁶⁴ R. Feldstein complements Jean-François Lyotard's terminological delineation by stating that it is the "war" between conservatives and paradigm shifters that produces the context for the manifestation of the "postmodern crisis of representation"⁶⁵, which is much more than the ideological conflicts around multiculturalism, postcolonialism, feminism, sexual orientation issues and *political correctness*. What is being felt, in fact, is a crisis of representation, in a societal framework where achieving a political (and even cultural!) consensus on values has become almost impossible.

The New Language

"As the world changes, so do words", stated Larousse as a guiding definition, the recent epitaph of the newly published 3rd edition of the *Orthographic, Orthoepic, and Morphologic Dictionary of the Romanian Language*⁶⁶, containing about 3000 changes, most of which are new forms of words already present in the language. However, in the wake of globalization, a substantial number of newly introduced terms have also been standardized, including borrowings from the English language that have come into use ("afterschool", "take away", "breaking news", etc.), as well as the terminology of the coronavirus pandemic. This edition, published under the patronage of "Iorgu Iordan-Alexandru Rosetti" Institute of Linguistics of the Romanian Academy, is extremely relevant to the debate on the paradigm shift that has occurred through the filter of political correctness. Anticipated in the previous chapter of this paper, the issue of language

⁶³ William S. Lind, *quoted work*, p. 24.

⁶⁴ Richard Feldstein, *Political Correctness: A Response from the Cultural Left*, Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 8.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁶ "Iorgu Iordan – Alexandru Rosetti" Institute of Linguistics, Romanian Academy, *DOOM 3 – Dicționarul ortografic, ortoepic și morfologic al limbii române*, third edition, Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic, 2022.

in relation to political correctness reflects the type of relationship between culture and language postulated by Michel Foucault and taken up by Norman Fairclough, according to which “cultures exist in the form of languages” or “discourses”.⁶⁷ Language is therefore a form of articulation of culture, but more than that, language in turn shapes mentalities, with political correctness advocates using it even with strategic prerogatives or as a ‘discursive weapon’.

Although we might be tempted to agree with the (superficial) view that the abuse of language for the sake of avoiding discrimination is a recent problem, Edna Andrews’ 1996 article has a symptomatic title: ‘Cultural Sensitivity and Political Correctness: The Linguistic Problem of Naming’⁶⁸. Contextually, how speakers of a language refer to each other was already a ‘problem’. Here, E. Andrews includes a table of the most frequently used discriminatory terms, accompanied by their “culturally sensitive” or politically correct equivalents. Some examples would be: “woman” (or even the radical term “womyn”, to avoid the “man” component, although etymologically speaking, in Old English – the one that produced the term “woman”, after a string of variants such as “wimman”, “wiman” and “wifman” – the lexeme “man” meant both sexes, more precisely “person”⁶⁹) instead of “girl” or “lady”; “sex” instead of “gender”; “flight attendant” instead of “steward” or “stewardess”; “visually impaired” instead of “blind”; “physically or mentally handicapped” instead of “disabled”; “Ukraine” (with a surplus of extended connotations – especially in view of the tense international situation at the time of writing – March 2022!) instead of the English articulated definite article ‘the Ukraine’ (the explanation⁷⁰ would be that there is no definite article in Ukrainian or Russian, which is attached to the noun by English speakers who knew the borderland meaning of ‘Ukraine’. In the historical context, given the former Soviet occupation of Ukraine, referring to it as a “borderland” is considered denigrating by Ukrainians). In E. Andrews’ list, the most obvious and striking remains the move to exclude or substitute any term containing the radical man, for reasons of feminist politics and, in most cases, without any real etymological basis.

Even more worthy of attention is the questioning that the author places immediately after the named terms: “Can a linguistic response, a lexical substitution, solve extra-linguistic problems in our society or facilitate a possible solution to these problems?”⁷¹. A possible answer is given in the interrogative register: “Can lexical usage determine or influence the way a speaker sees the extralinguistic world? Does language organize or control thought?”⁷². From the range of different options, E. Andrews draws on two contrasting perspectives on the relationship between language and thought.

⁶⁷ Norman Fairclough, ‘Political correctness’: the politics of culture and language, in *Discourse and Society*, no. 1, 2003, p. 18, URL: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/42888547>, accessed on 03. 01. 2022.

⁶⁸ Edna Andrews, *Cultural Sensitivity and Political Correctness: The Linguistic Problem of Naming*, in *American Speech*, no. 4, 1996, URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/455713>, accessed on 03. 01. 2022.

⁶⁹ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/woman>, accessed on 04. 01. 2022

⁷⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-18233844>, accessed on 04. 01. 2022.

⁷¹ Edna Andrews, *quoted art.*, p. 391.

⁷² *Ibidem*.

The first one, the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, first put forward by Edward Sapir in 1929 and later developed by Benjamin Whorf, argues that language imposes certain restrictions on the way the speaker perceives extralinguistic reality.⁷³ At the other extreme is Charles S. Peirce, for whom language is a system of signs that leads to the organization of perceptions of the surrounding world. E. Andrews notes the analogy with the view of the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, for whom language organizes thought.

Restriction or mere organization of reality, both meanings have their place in the discussion of political correctness. According to Geoffrey Hughes, political correctness is about "establishing new agendas by introducing new terms and redefining already familiar words".⁷⁴ In other words, a semantic or lexical reconfiguration of existing vocabulary. In G. Hughes' view, unusual lexical constructs such as *wimmin*, physically challenged or even *herstory*, instead of *history*, have had at the basis of their emergence the drawing of attention to a particular problem and issue, provoking – in response – hostile reactions.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Ferdinand de Saussure warned that "of all social institutions, language is the least susceptible to innovation"⁷⁵, a reasoning based on the lack of collective resistance to the new. But as G. Hughes, a century has succeeded in changing this detente: political correctness has emerged, the aim of which has been and continues to be the attempt to change or suppress not the whole language or language system, but at least the meanings of particular words. In particular, it represents the attempt to establish a new public discourse, a polite one.⁷⁶

The constraints imposed by *political correctness* also extend to the level of "impersonal authorities". In 1994, in *The Empire of Words*⁷⁷, J. Willinsky criticized the *Oxford English Dictionary* for being biased against the middle class, the male gender, chauvinism, imperialism and insults to minorities. These accusations come against a background where, until the late 20th century, such works were written exclusively by men.

In 1949, Simone de Beauvoir argued that, since language is inherited from a male society and contains such prejudices, women should simply "steal" the instrument and use it for their own good. In response, feminist redefinitions and publications written exclusively by women have emerged. For example, Jane Mills's 1989 volume *Womanwords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Patriarchal Society*⁷⁸ re-evaluated entries in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, but was more balanced than other publications in whose corpus the propaganda was apparent – Casey Miller and Kate Swift's 1981 volume *The Handbook of Non-Sexist Writing*⁷⁹,

⁷³ *Ibidem*, p. 392.

⁷⁴ Geoffrey Hughes, *quoted work*, p. 87.

⁷⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 59.

⁷⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁷ John Willinsky, *The Empire of Words: The Reign of the OED*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994, *apud* Geoffrey Hughes, *quoted work*, p. 89.

⁷⁸ Jane Mills, *Womanwords*. London: Virago, 1989, *apud* Geoffrey Hughes, *quoted work*.

⁷⁹ Casey Miller and Kate Swift, *The Handbook of Non-Sexist Writing*. London: The Women's Press, 1981, *apud* Geoffrey Hughes, *quoted work*.

which not only gave new meanings to words, but proposed new lexemes (fathering as the equivalent of mothering, which meant ‘to care for’).

Acknowledging her favourable attitude towards “a concept with few supporters nowadays” (with reference to 2011), Janelle Reinelt, in “The Performance of Political Correctness”⁸⁰, justifies the intervention of political correctness in language and, in particular, in the attribution of new connotations to words by analogy with the functions of rhetoric, but also with that of publicity, attributed to politicians during election campaigns. In this respect, J. Reinelt’s position is explicit: ‘capturing and controlling terminology or concepts is inherently neither good nor bad – it is a means of mastering power and is a common tool in the public sphere’. Therefore, rhetoric is manipulative and, in Victor Davis Hanson’s view⁸¹, distorting reality through vocabulary is a danger. According to V. D. Hanson, language is constantly being manipulated for political purposes by both the left and the right wings. However, liberals are more concerned with being “politically” right than factually right, while conservatives prefer to call a spade a spade.

From an institutional perspective, the latest debate⁸² on politically correct terminology concerns an internal European Commission document, submitted by European Equality Commissioner Helena Dalli, which urged officials to replace the term “Christmas” with “the holiday season”. Harshly criticized by right-wing politicians, the initiative was eventually withdrawn by the EU executive, especially after accusations of trying to “cancel Christmas”. This policy of inclusion, which claims to combat all forms of discrimination – in this case, religious discrimination – actually ends up creating more discrimination. Suppressing the use of the name of a fundamental Christian holiday is not an attempt to make ‘non-Christians’ not feel ‘offended’ (after all, how could the word “Christmas” offend anyone?), but a virulent attack on Christian tradition. This example also shows how important language is and how dangerous its manipulation can be.

In *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language*⁸³, Keith Allan and Kate Burridge examine the interaction of politically correct initiatives with notions of taboo and censorship. The authors readily admit that they treat political correctness as both a “brainwashing program” and a form of “good manners”⁸⁴. It is admitted that, over the years, this current has been very successful in transforming the linguistic behaviour of speakers, associating political correctness with the phrase “euphemism with attitude”, i.e. a deliberate toning down of certain (often physical) characteristics of subjects.

⁸⁰ Janelle Reinelt, “The Performance of Political Correctness”, in *Theatre Research International*, no. 2, 2011.

⁸¹ Kate Chow, *quoted art.*

⁸² Daniel Boffey, “EU advice on inclusive language withdrawn after rightwing outcry”, in *The Guardian*, November 2021, URL: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/nov/30/eu-advice-on-inclusive-language-withdrawn-after-rightwing-outcry>, accessed on 08.01. 2022.

⁸³ Keith Allan and Kate Burridge, *Forbidden Words: Taboo and the Censoring of Language*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem.*

A debate on the language of *political correctness* would not be able to escape the contribution of writer George Orwell to our understanding of any kind of oppression today. It is worth noting, in this context, Geoffrey Hughes' dedication to him in the opening of the book: "To the memory of George Orwell, who understood political correctness in so many guises".⁸⁵ In the well-known *1984*, printed in 1949, apart from its clear anti-totalitarian message, one of the outstanding merits of G. Orwell is to have conceived a language ("Newspeak") that fully reflected the coordinates of thinking in a world governed by a totalitarian system, with a deferential emphasis on the obviousness of the absurd.

In *Language, Nineteen Eighty-Four, and 1989*⁸⁶, four scholars of anthropology and cognitive science attribute to G. Orwell the Sapir-Whorf line of thought, which, as mentioned earlier, assumes that language is capable of influencing thinking about extralinguistic reality. The authors also consider David Kronenfeld's theory stating that word meanings are "a special case of cognitive structure"⁸⁷, equivalent to the Saussurean concept of "signified". Thus, if a word is learned as part of the language learning process itself (in the early years of life), then the word is not just part of the system, but is one of the (intrinsic) elements from which the system is constructed. And in the case of late assimilation, the word is perceived as an artificial addition to an already defined system. It therefore becomes easier to manipulate. This explanation is particularly valid for words with an abstract meaning, which cannot be assimilated in the early years of life because of the lack of contact with an object to be designated by the word. The authors give the example of the noun 'democracy'. The conclusion of the study is that language changes, but it changes in response to political pressures only where the change is a meaningful fit with the linguistic context, having continuity with previous usage and being shaped by shared experience.⁸⁸

Conservative critics of political correctness often resort to Orwellian arguments, as Richard Feldstein observes in *Political Correctness: A Response from the Cultural Left*.⁸⁹ For instance, David Lehman⁹⁰ accuses left-wing opponents of similar conduct to that adopted by the "Thought Police" in a highly intolerant government that seeks to silence anyone who rejects its views. Hilton Kramer⁹¹ blames political correctness for "the corruption of language on an Orwellian scale". From a holistic perspective, Roger Kimball⁹² points out that

⁸⁵ Geoffrey Hughes, *quoted work*.

⁸⁶ Michał Buchowski, David B. Kronenfeld, William Peterman & Lynn Thomas, *Language, Nineteen Eighty-Four, and 1989*, in *Language in Society*, no. 4, 1994, URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4168556>, accessed on 08.01.2022.

⁸⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 555.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 573.

⁸⁹ Richard Feldstein, *quoted work*.

⁹⁰ David Lehman, "The Reign of Intolerance", in *Partisan Review*, no. 4, 1993, pp. 598-603, *apud* Richard Feldstein, *quoted work*, p. 62.

⁹¹ Hilton Kramer, "Confronting the Monolith", in *Partisan Review*, no. 4, 1993, pp. 569-73, *apud* Richard Feldstein, *quoted work*, p. 62.

⁹² Roger Kimball, "From Farce to Tragedy", in *Partisan Review*, no. 4, 1993, pp. 564-69, *apud* Richard Feldstein, *quoted work*, p. 62.

the frequent use of the adjective “Orwellian” in reference to political correctness is nothing less than a perfect illustration of Orwellian doublethink and the principle enunciated in *Animal Farm* that “all animals are equal, but some are more equal than others”.⁹³

A New Form of Censorship: Cancel Culture

The concept of *cancel culture*, more and more present (and with increasingly violent manifestations) in recent years, is, according to Alan Dershowitz⁹⁴, a construct of the “woke” generation, but an “illegitimate descendant”⁹⁵ of McCarthyism of the extreme right and Stalinism of the extreme left. In order to examine the linguistic meaning of the phrase, A. Dershowitz refers to the American dictionary Merriam-Webster, according to which “the term cancel takes on a new meaning”. Whereas previously the action of “cancelling” was limited to objects (e.g. cancelling an event), now “cancelling” or *cancel culture* refers to “removing any support for public persons in response to their objectionable behaviour or opinions”. In essence, an act of boycott aimed at dismantling forms of culture or thought.

The dictionary also explains the origin of the term: thus, the idea of “cancelling” or, as it has been labelled by some, *cancel culture*, has gained momentum in recent years following the debates launched by “#MeToo”, but also by other movements, calling for greater accountability from public figures. Political leftists and rightists are commonly dismissing *political correctness* as the territory of the opposite camp. In this respect, A. Dershowitz admits that there are views that associate the whole phenomenon of *cancel culture* with an exaggeration concocted by the right wing to discredit the left one.

As for the reference to McCarthyism and Stalinism, the difference between them and *cancel culture*, as seen by A. Dershowitz, is that the former used political, governing power, while the latter relied on the power of public opinion, social media and other “constitutional forms of private action”.⁹⁶ This power is amplified by the speed of the internet and social media, which are in fact “the weapons of cancel culture”. The quote from Winston Churchill, which the author uses as a guideline for his argument, is also eloquent: ‘A lie travels around the globe while the truth is putting on its shoes’.

In a grave tone that only confirms the seriousness of the problem, A. Dershowitz points to an imminent danger: the danger to freedom of speech may reflect “a continuing trend” rather than “a temporary phase”. If this trend becomes “the new reality”, it will lead to “the death or at least the wounding of freedom of speech and fair trials”.⁹⁷ Also in the risk category is “creativity” itself. Today’s

⁹³ George Orwell, *Animal Farm*, Signet Classics, 1996.

⁹⁴ Alan Dershowitz, *Cancel Culture: The Latest Attack on Free Speech and Due Process*, New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2020.

⁹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 16.

⁹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

⁹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

intellectuals fear that the product they deliver, what they have written (or said) over the years may be taken out of context and used as a weapon against them in the war against *political incorrectness*.

One of the many examples A. Dershowitz uses is Woody Allen's "cancellation".⁹⁸ A lawyer by profession, Dershowitz defended Mia Farrow in her lawsuit against the filmmaker, who was accused of sexually abusing their adopted daughter Dylan Farrow. Although, according to the lawyer, there was no evidence of Woody Allen's guilt, since the MeToo movement and the rise of cancel culture, the star has been ostracized by the public, losing multiple artistic collaborations (among other things, the publisher who bought his memoir dropped the collaboration the next day; the book eventually appeared with another publisher). What A. Dershowitz wants to point out in this case is that Woody Allen was convicted by cancel culture without being found guilty by any other court, the director being deprived of the presumption of innocence.

The argument to which we will resort in detailing the case study, that of accusing dead people – who, of course, cannot fight back – of political incorrectness is considered by A. Dershowitz as "one of the most treacherous consequences of cancel culture", denying those targeted the right to a fair literary or historical trial.

On July the 7th 2020, Harper's Magazine published a letter (entitled "A Letter on Justice and Open Debate"⁹⁹) signed by 150 personalities (academics, journalists, writers, etc.) in a protest against *cancel culture*. Alan Dershowitz included the letter in the appendices of the volume, although, as he himself notes, he was not invited to sign for a reason that is paradoxical to the message of this initiative: he was "cancelled" by the very people who thought up the letter against *cancel culture*. Beyond this conflict, the text of the letter is an enlightening one and points to the danger behind *cancel culture*: "the free exchange of information and ideas, the lifeblood of a liberal society, is daily becoming more constricted", as censorship spreads ever more widely in the culture: "an intolerance of opposing views, a vogue for public shaming and ostracism, and the tendency to dissolve complex policy issues in a blinding moral certainty."¹⁰⁰ In practice, "editors are fired for running controversial pieces; books are withdrawn for alleged inauthenticity; journalists are barred from writing on certain topics; professors are investigated for quoting works of literature in class; a researcher is fired for circulating a peer-reviewed academic study; and the heads of organizations are ousted for what are sometimes just clumsy mistakes."¹⁰¹

Regardless of the arguments behind these actions (or behind cancel culture), they only lead to a constant narrowing of the boundaries of what can be said without the danger of being excluded, denied, ostracized. The signatories denounce the restrictions on debate, which in fact make democracy impossible: "The way to defeat bad ideas is by exposure, argument, and persuasion, not by trying to

⁹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 35.

⁹⁹ *A Letter on Justice and Open Debate*, July 2020, URL: <https://harpers.org/a-letter-on-justice-and-open-debate/>, accessed on 13.01. 2022.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰¹ *Ibidem*.

silence or wish them away”, and writers need “a culture that leaves us room for experimentation, risk taking, and even mistakes.”¹⁰²

The topicality of this (sub)chapter is confirmed by the latest manifestation of cancel culture as an immediate effect of the outbreak of the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict (24 February 2022). The economic sanctions imposed by the West on Russia have been coupled with a series of informal measures, the most controversial of which is the very resort to the cancellation of Russian culture. Following the pace of events in Ukraine, in the course of just a few weeks there have been measures to sack cultural personalities or to cancel Russian performances, as well as the very act of challenging historically significant personalities who represent a milestone in universal culture.

Cancel Russian culture is targeting all forms of culture, by extension: conductor Valerii Gherghiev was fired from the Munich Philharmonic for not publicly condemning the actions of Russian President Vladimir Putin; the Royal Opera in London cancelled performances of the Bolshoi Ballet in Moscow, and the Helix Theatre in Dublin cancelled the performance of *Swan Lake* by the Royal Moscow Ballet ensemble in solidarity with the Ukrainian people¹⁰³, etc. In addition, the Italian University Milan-Bicocca has decided to postpone/remove the course on F. M. Dostoevsky from the curriculum. At the public and media insistence of the lecturer of the course, the writer and professor Paolo Nori – who has described the decision of the management of the institution as an act of “censorship”¹⁰⁴ – the University has abandoned the measure of cancelling one of the titans of universal literature. The operating principles of the primacy of “cancel culture” are outlined by Paolo Nori: “Today it is not only wrong to be Russian in Italy, but also to be a dead Russian”. Paradoxically, Dostoevsky was himself sentenced to death in 1849 “because he had read something forbidden”, the duality of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy being considered fundamental – today and always! – for the cultural re-appropriation of non-violent models.

Bureaucratic demands (including the request to remove the statue of Dostoevsky, a monument in Florence’s Cascine Park on the occasion of the 200th anniversary of the writer’s birth) are accompanied by a series of informal (personal) but influential public reactions – for example, Oprah Winfrey has given up Lev Tolstoy’s *War and Peace* in her book club.¹⁰⁵

Mostly filtered through the prism of the Eastern European past, the phenomenon is embedded in traumatic cultural reflexes: “(...) to drag culture into this war is a totalitarian expression of power that we saw manifested last century: in the Nazi burning of books, in censorship and imprisonment of the “people’s (cultural) enemies”, in communism.”

¹⁰² *Ibidem*.

¹⁰³ Iulian Capsali, “Războiul cultural ca semn al amurgului civilizației”, in *Active News*, March 2022, URL: <https://www.activenews.ro/opinii/Iulian-Capsali-RAZBOIUL-CULTURAL-CA-SEMN-AL-AMURGULUI-CIVILIZATIEI-173106>, accessed on 12.03.2022.

¹⁰⁴ https://www.ansa.it/english/news/lifestyle/arts/2022/03/02/ukraine-dostoevsky-course-reinstated-after-cancellation_9f790b2b-9dc3-4084-a74e-906aca5a3f7e.html, accessed on 12.03. 2022.

¹⁰⁵ <https://worldcrunch.com/culture-society/culture-war-russia/propaganda-in-a-democracy>, accessed on 12.03.2022.

New Media and Political Correctness

Ostracism has become an easy practice with the arrival and expansion of New Media, by means of which anyone, at any time and in any way, can start a war with a simple intervention (comment, post, etc.). Moreover, in recent years, these communication platforms, which are meant to be, by definition, a space for free expression of opinion and debate, have taken the form of a mechanism for sanctioning "politically incorrect" behaviour. A recent example is the banning of former President Donald Trump from Facebook and Twitter in January 2021, after the Capitol riots, on the grounds that Trump posed "a danger to public safety".¹⁰⁶

It is worth noting the apparent freedom of choice available to users of virtual interaction platforms: by "filtering" the content being streamed; consumers are performing a selection exercise based on various rationales. Beyond this freedom of choice, there is the danger of ostracising other users who share divergent opinions. For example, the freedom to 'report' someone for content deemed inappropriate can be interpreted in two ways: either the user's actions do indeed represent a danger, in which case by reporting them we are protecting ourselves, or the interpretation we give to a particular piece of content represents an erroneous or at least subjective judgement, in which case we are punishing a user for unfounded reasons, thereby contributing to the censorship propagated in the virtual environment.

Jordan T. Moss and Peter J. O'Connor¹⁰⁷ provided data from studies devoted to the relationship between the political attitudes of reviewers and their social media behaviour. They found that users with explicit political views tend to interact with those who share their political attitudes and values and to distance themselves from those with different views. The named option favours uniformity of information. Studies also show that those with extremist political views (either left or right-wing) are more active in the online stream than users with balanced attitudes.

In an article¹⁰⁸ on how social media urges us to favour the politically correct over the factually correct, Heidi Herzogenrath-Amelung highlights several cases of public "condemnation", especially in cyberspace, of well-known personalities who have allegedly erred by making discriminatory public statements. The first case presented is that of immunologist Tim Hunt, otherwise a Nobel laureate, who, at a conference in Korea in 2015, was asked about the role of women in science: "The trouble with girls in the lab is that you fall in love with them, they fall in love with you, you criticize them and then they cry."¹⁰⁹ The author points out that no one confronted the scientist directly. Instead, reactions have been inflamed on Twitter: Hunt has been accused of chauvinism and asked to resign

¹⁰⁶ <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/06/07/technology/trump-social-media-ban.html>, accessed on 14.01. 2022.

¹⁰⁷ Jordan T. Moss, Peter J. O'Connor, "Political correctness and the alt-right: The development of extreme political attitudes", 2020, URL: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7540844/>, accessed on 10.02. 2022.

¹⁰⁸ Heidi Herzogenrath-Amelung, "The New Instantaneity: How Social Media Are Helping Us Privilege the (Politically) Correct over the True", in *Media, Culture & Society*, vol 38(7), 2016.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 1080-1081.

immediately. University College London, where he was employed, reacted swiftly and uncompromisingly: it publicly declared that it had zero tolerance for chauvinism and that it was an equal opportunities institution. H. Herzogenrath-Amelung, in her standpoint, did not support the sexism contained in Hunt's statements, but condemned the way society reacted to them. The author points out that now that the scientist has been "banned", the debates that might have taken place will not take place.¹¹⁰ In support of her argument, H. Herzogenrath-Amelung quotes the writer Van Badham: "Sacking, banning, blocking or removing is the easiest form of punitive action to choose before a baying social media mob, because it immediately blinds everyone to the details of more complex social problems which these controversies allow to be seen – and for which no individual [...] deserves either to be completely exonerated or to shoulder the entire blame."¹¹¹

In contrast, the perspective of the left-wing philosopher Slavoj Žižek¹¹² should also be mentioned, who notes the inadequacy of political correctness in the way it promotes a code of expression and a series of symbolic gestures of respect for the Other, but which are not accompanied by real social change. S. Žižek argues that, before rigorously examining the statements made, the living conditions of the disadvantaged must be remedied. By correcting the social condition, politically correct language would no longer be artificial and constrictive, but would become the natural reflection of an extended social contract.

Going back, another case that Heidi Herzogenrath-Amelung refers to is that of athlete Voula Papachristou, who was excluded from the 2012 London Olympics on the grounds of comments labelled racist made on her Twitter page. Before being "judged" by the Olympic Committee, the athlete was vilified by Twitter users with messages such as "If you're serious, the Greek Olympic team should put you on the first plane home".¹¹³ As with Tim Hunt, H. Herzogenrath-Amelung criticises the sanction imposed by the Olympic authority, stressing that it came in the context of reactions on social media.

Central to the article is the reference to Martin Heidegger's perspective on the attributes "true" and "right", often interchangeable in the collective mindset. The importance of truth, in the philosopher's view, is not the correspondence with the object to which it refers, but its "revelation"¹¹⁴, so that only afterwards the object can be judged. This was Heidegger's structural understanding of the Greek term *alētheia*, translated as "truth", but which rather means "openness", "un-hiddenness" or "un-concealment". Truth is therefore not equivalent to correctness, but it is a 'condition' of it, the serious mistake of political correctness being the positioning of correctness above truth.

¹¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 1082.

¹¹¹ Van Badham, "Tim Hunt shouldn't resign: he should lead the way against sexism in science", *The Guardian*, URL: <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/jun/16/tim-hunt-shouldnt-resign-he-should-lead-the-way-against-sexism-in-science>, accessed on 15.01. 2022.

¹¹² Matthew Sharpe, "Words, Tweets and Stones in the Political Correctness Wars", *The Conversation*, 2017, URL: <https://theconversation.com/words-tweets-and-stones-in-the-political-correctness-wars-73188>, accessed on 10.02. 2022.

¹¹³ Heidi Herzogenrath-Amelung, *quoted art.*, p. 1084.

¹¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 1081.

In 2016, the Oxford English Dictionary named the (adjectivally reloaded!) noun "post-truth" as the word of the year. The context is not random, as 2016 was the year of the Brexit campaign in the UK and an election year in the United States. In the spirit of the Dictionary's explanation, the term "post-truth" refers to "circumstances in which objective facts have less influence in shaping public opinion than do emotions and personal beliefs". George Orwell, attached as a visionary and creator of the conceptual premises of the term, anticipates the evidence that "the idea itself of objective truth is disappearing" and that "lies will be part of history". What George Orwell highlights is precisely the emotional component of politics, but also the unstable relationship of the individual with reason and truth.¹¹⁵ A perfectly plausible perspective in this respect is also the nuance proposed by Tony Crowley, who points out the danger associated with post-truth through its performative potential.¹¹⁶ Hence the new landmarks of a perpetuated state of affairs: the more we are told that we live in an era of post-truth, the greater the chances of accepting and conforming to these coordinates.

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