

# CORRECTLY POLITICAL

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Although with variable visibility, the politically correct (PC) increasingly occupies our everyday life, being used in various, more or less, formalised contexts of interaction between individuals. In normal circumstances of collective life, the politically incorrect (PI) is less and less accepted, and to successfully navigate in the complex world of social interaction – for example, in the labyrinthic field of codes associated with work relations – requires a reasonable command of the rules adhering to the PC norm. In certain “sensitive” contexts, the predominance of the PC position reveals all its splendour. We are referring to particularly delicate situations in which the PI is tolerated because it is PI to reprimand the use of PI language. In particular circumstances, a child, a disabled person or someone belonging to an ethnic, religious or cultural minority is allowed to use language conforming less to the procedures imposed by the PC. As long as the informal, as well as the formal, rules of PC are correctly followed, it is irrelevant to know whether the content of our thoughts is adequate or, on the contrary, opposed to the way our actions are perceived. To be accused of hypocrisy or cynicism regarding PC only happens when the cleavage between our actions and

our thoughts is manifested in the former. One of the most common forms of hypocrisy associated with the PC discourse comes from the paternalism expressed through a manifestly exaggerated approach. The ability and autonomy of a subject or group of subjects can be brought into question by the overzealous way in which we follow the rules of political correctness. In that case, the PC becomes a tool to express PI thoughts. In this context, therefore, there is no room to make visible the contradiction between what is said and what is done; there is only the possibility of contradicting what is said by the way it is said. In other words, what is done is what is said.

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*Political correctness: the avoidance of forms of expression or action that are perceived to exclude, marginalize, or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against.*

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The PC discourse aims to avoid offending individuals belonging to the more vulnerable layers of society. One of the most common criticisms made to the PC is that it restricts people's ability to express themselves in a society that aspires to be free, rendering it as a kind of dictatorship of the offended against the remaining members. Bearing in mind that political correctness works by anticipating a potential offence, in order to avoid it beforehand, we can say that the "dictatorship of the offended" unfolds retroactively, from a position situated in a future to escape, i.e., it positions itself from the point of view of the potential offended (who should not be offended). However, this gesture

of anticipation tells us that we can only conceive the retroactive position of the offended through the corresponding projective position of the potential offender. For the offence not to take place, a potential offender is enough – one that, through the preventive gesture, identifies a possible offended susceptible of being offended by a certain potential offence. Therefore, the dictatorship of the offended originates in the anticipatory self-positioning of the potential offender, following a logic as virtual as it is circular. The offended, in turn, is caught in the net of the offence to be avoided and has little room to find another position outside this circle: either she was not offended because the mechanism of anticipation and prevention worked effectively (although not escaping from the stigma of the virtual offence); or she took offence for the opposite reasons. There is, in fact, a small subversion allowed to the offended: to not be offended by the offence directed at her. But this narrow opening of freedom will always be dependent on the dominant position of the potential offender. Regardless of the numerous constraints this circularity may bring to the potential offender, it gives access to a discursive territory that belongs to him. It is up to the person with the power to speak to identify his interlocutor as potentially offended, i.e. as someone particularly vulnerable, and prevent the offence from being directed at her. Whether the offence took place or not, the offended is invariably integrated within a social group perceived by the majority of potential offenders as being particularly vulnerable. According to the logic underlying the PC discourse, this group is entitled to not being offended insofar as it is deprived

of a voice. Through the preventive act, the offender, who did not become one, is integrated, in turn, within the majority with access to speech. That not said that could have been said belongs to him alone. This way, he is simultaneously the emitter and addressee of the offence that must not take place. The prevention of the offence is directed, therefore, not so much at the potential offended but to the fraternal community of potential offenders. It functions as a cue between peers and, unlike what is often defended, does not aim to structure a more inclusive discourse. It is important to bear in mind that the community of potential offenders does not need to be physically present in a certain discursive situation; what matters is that, even when absent, it makes itself present. More than the numerical criterion, what defines the majority is precisely its ability to be present, even when absent. In the limits established between potential offender and offended, the PC discourse draws a territory of access and visibility regarding speech. Strictly speaking, the preventive gesture does not take us to the virtual plane of the possible – what can but should not be said – but to the actual manifestation of what was not said through what is said. Within the PC logic, it is not enough to anticipate and prevent the occurrence of the offence; it is essential, through the use of manifestly non-offensive language, to make that preventive gesture perceptible to the remaining potential offenders. The PC mechanism strives, as it were, to make that absence visible.

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Therefore, the PC discourse implies the identification of groups in society that, according to the of-

fender, are more exposed to acts of discrimination and prejudice. Without a particular target, the PC position lacks direction and intentionality. In its relation to the offence that will not come, political correctness situates itself between two sociocultural phenomena that are not extraneous to it. On one side, it can be seen merely as a particular variant, perhaps an intensified form, of politeness cemented among members of a society that strives to be civilized and regards gratuitous offences unjustified. As much as PC critics stress its overzealous control over the use of speech, they are always in a weak position when their critique is advanced through the relativization of the content of the offence. The offence is always relative, and against a general perception among the potential offenders about what is offensive or not there is not much that can be done. On the other side, the PC discourse finds its limit in the growing terminological sanitation pervading the contemporary institutional world, from the state machine to labour relations management. The hygienization of language is expressed in multiple processes of life management. It assumes, nonetheless, two distinct facets: a commercial and a bureaucratic dimension. On the one hand, we face a “softer” sanitary inclination, manifested in euphemistic processes of concealment of the violence intrinsic to the commercialisation of everyday life, particularly in labour relations. In this regard, note how deregulated and low paid work is increasingly performed by “technicians, collaborators and consultants” of all sorts who, more often than not, carry out repetitive, menial, low-skilled tasks. On the other hand, we face a “strong” bureau-

cratic sterilization of language that does not intend to terminologically soften a given reality, but expresses a position of power according to the cruel refinements of the world of administration. In this case, the terminological arbitrariness reflects the violence resulting from the arbitrariness inherent in the state's position of maximal power, hence its typical penchant for strong irony, or even sadism. It is precisely such position of strength that surfaces in such type of terminological dissonance. To refer to torture as "Enhanced Interrogation Techniques" or to designate significant cuts in pensions "Extraordinary Solidarity Contribution" are examples of the sadistic-bureaucratic strand. In this manner, the PC discourse is enclosed by three distinct domains: underneath, and in a more diffuse way, by the "civic politeness" required when dealing with the more vulnerable groups of society; laterally, and in a more specific way, by the two mechanisms of linguistic deflection of violence that colonize our lives. In the latter case, political correctness is situated between the informal, but direct, concealment pertaining to the usual linguistic softening of the violence of the commodification of everyday life, and the formal, but indirect, uncovering, manifest in the bureaucratic marking of state force. As a generic and preliminary hypothesis, we can consider that political correctness performs a double discursive operation, being positioned between the informal direct concealing and the formal indirect uncovering of economic-bureaucratic violence.

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On a first level, the effectiveness of the PC dis-

course results from the normative intersection between what is said and the contextual situation (using the right words in the right place). Linguistic form and content are far from irrelevant, but are clearly insufficient to clarify the stages resulting from the discursive process. Furthermore, the interpretation of what is said requires a first, usually unconscious, reading of the discursive situation that, as we have seen, cannot be reduced to the identification of the potential offended by the potential offender. The direction and intention we attribute to the PC are, thus, the result of a subterranean interpretative movement that conjures up a situation, summoning potential offended individuals and the community of potential offenders (that makes itself present, even if absent). Before being a cause, the use of the PC speech is the effect of a number of preceding topical norms and readings. Of course, this is a generic requirement for any communicative practice, but nonetheless necessary for PC to unfold between the contextual reading, the manifestation of the prevention of the offence and its actual perception. In the normative position it produces regarding what should, or should not, be said and heard, the PC mechanism establishes a practical relation with the available linguistic instruments, being a kind of manual on how to use language in particular contexts. Its robustness results, in this sense, from the consistency formed between norm and “use”. Insofar as it manifests a set of communication rules that regulate our discursive actions, the PC discourse takes the structure of a practice that acquires the predominant form of a practice of speech.

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In what sense can we state that the PC discourse is primarily a practice, if we position it as a set of partially latent norms or rules? Is it a code of social conduct or its practice? A box of discursive tools or a pre-established set of rules? Norms and actions can be interdependent but they are not the same thing. When we suggested that the PC discourse operates as a mode of use of language, we should bear in mind that “mode” and “use” are structured by practice. There is no form independent of practice and practice is the main formalizer and formatter of the PC discursive “tool”; it is the agent that joins norm and action. In this regard, one should bear in mind that the formal deployment of PC terminology in the world of administration does not require a set of previously established rules (even if sometimes, and increasingly so, the right to non-offence is justified and grounded according to the letter of the law and the Constitution). Since it is not necessary to formalize the form via bureaucratic or legal means, it is not possible to make reference to a code of conduct without the manifestation, through “use”, of its conformation. Some norms can be inferred from their practice (such as, for example, the greater tolerance towards political incorrectness when voiced by a member of the target group of PC discourse) and, at a second stage, conclude that they gain a life of their own within the legal and pseudo-legalistic spheres. But no rules survive irrespective of their use. Practice produces norms that, in turn, condition practice. This perspective presents the PC discourse as naturally resulting from the consolidation of habits and a “world

view” common to the society from which it stems. Here, we face an organic image of the relationship between mode and use that is, in effect, (re)produced by practice. Taking such path does not allow us to reduce the discursive practices associated with the PC to a specific mode of use of language, since the former are also a “mode of production” of a certain perception of discourse. Practice produces the surface through which the apparent natural and organic dimensions of discourse shine.

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The practical relationship between mode and use brings us to the core of a second question that should not be neglected: the PC discourse operates on the surface of perception. We had already suggested that, within the PC mechanism, the presence of a cleavage or disagreement between action and thought is not relevant since its effectiveness requires the conformity between action and normative procedures, validated through the perception of third parties (potential offenders). Therefore, it is meaningless to conceive the PC discourse in terms of action, if by action we mean an individual response to (external and internal) given stimuli, irrespective of their intersubjective visibility. The hypocrisy associated with political correctness does not only emerge when the dissonance between PC action and PI thought becomes visible; it emerges also through the fissure that can be opened between visible PC actions and imperceptible PI actions, that is, amid the visibility and opacity of what is said and done. The PC discourse requires the perception of others to exist but it is not completely transparent. The speaker

may be aware that it is acceptable to say x in context a, but unacceptable to say it in context b, without being able to clearly distinguish the line separating one situation from the other. The same individual might know perfectly well that it is possible to say x in a certain way (for example, in an ironic or cynical way), but inadmissible to say it in a different manner, without being able to determine the conditions that make it sayable or hearable. The lack of subjective perception and reflexivity concerning the rules of the PC is not only associated with variations relative to external circumstances or changes in performance. It is, first and foremost, a necessary condition for the natural operation of the PC discourse. When the subject is too aware of the procedures conditioning his speech, it becomes quite difficult to smoothly follow the normative guidelines. The uneasiness associated with becoming aware of a delicate situation is an inexhaustible source of humour precisely because, in normal circumstances, PC discursive spontaneity should prevail. On the other hand, the reflection about the conditions that delimit political correctness does not always result in the disclosure of its unfathomable mysteries. In this framework, discomfort and knowledge do not coincide. Accordingly, the organic internalization of political correctness presupposes a certain degree of invisibility and structural latency so that the discourse can be exerted in a “natural” way, so that one acts without thinking. The discomfort originated by the PC is usually aroused when one becomes aware that something inappropriate regarding that context was said or heard or when one becomes previously conscious

of a particularly delicate situation, where the offence is already present, even before any word is uttered (usually situations where the disadvantageous or vulnerable position of the potential offended is patent). In some cases, the degree of perception of the discursive situation can be intensified but the very mechanism that makes the offence possible, and avoidable, remains resolutely latent. For example, it is not unusual to recognise the potential offended and corresponding offence, but we rarely aware that the offence directed at the offended, is addressed, as an offence to be avoided, to the community of potential offenders. Becoming aware creates obstacles to the smooth unfolding of the PC discourse but it does not bring into question its underlying functioning mechanisms. We can place the PC within our culture if we take culture as the intersection of two contradictory processes: the cementing of actions into social customs and the spontaneous emergence of behavioural patterns. We all follow the PC conduct because we have done it until now and is the natural thing to do. This is the position of PC “cultural naturalization”, which is no more than the symptomatic mark of its latency. It is essential for the PC discourse to appear, but only partially, as the way it manifests itself is precisely the means through which the elements of its mode of operation remain subterranean. Taking into account that the visibility of the PC is related to its particular uses, we have to consider that action or, in a more consistent way, practice, is simultaneously a means of making it partially visible and partially invisible. We can claim, therefore, that practice informs the regime of visibility of the discursive

sive process.

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Generally, the structure of the system of visibility of the PC discourse insists in the need for occultation, articulating structural concealment through partial uncovering. Reduced to this simple scheme, it remains, however, abstracted from the social field. But even within such structural depuration, the question of invisibility indicates its inscription within a certain sociocultural territory. The image of the community of potential offenders that we derived from the abstract positions of the potential offender and the potential offended signals precisely the unfolding of the internal structure over the slippery world of intersubjective interaction. In the double “social” and “structural” dimension, the inscription of the invisibility of the PC discourse direct us towards a somewhat contradictory process of concealment. On one hand, the invisibility inherent in political correctness is orchestrated through the perception of the action, which directs our attention to the avoided offence, maintaining the structural and functional principles of the discursive mechanism underground; on the other hand, it is the action itself that, inscribed in the imperceptible surface of everyday life experience, has to support the appearance of occurring naturally and spontaneously. Occupying part of the indistinct plane of everyday life, political correctness is nowhere. In this way, the PC discourse has to be simultaneously visible at the level of the gesture and imperceptible as an action belonging to everyday life. From the subjective viewpoint, the double process of invisibility is sustained by two

mechanisms of occupation of a specific spatial-temporal territory, forming, in this manner, a topographic model for the colonization of a place. Locked into specific words or terminology, and anchored in a certain discursive gesture, the PC discourse emerges topologically within a particular discursive situation. The process of punctual anchorage is followed, in turn, by a dissolution of the gesture in the indistinct sea of the countless actions and experiences composing the naturalized experience of everyday life, extending until it disappears. According to this model, it is essential that the PC mechanism appears delimited, fragmented and isolated and, at the same time, diffuse and indistinct. Between natural, diffuse appearance and functional concealing, a distinction is drawn between what is not visible and what is latent. In order to function, the PC discourse has to remain partially invisible, outside the reach of our consciousness, but this degree of invisibility is already a product of its internal latency, that is, of the mechanisms that, while remaining invisible, make it operative. Through the “topographic” and subjective model of the regime of visibility, we approach a thesis dear to psychoanalysis: what we do not see is not only due to a cognitive limitation of ours, as if marking an excess belonging to reality, but passively waiting for our conscious and reflexive unveiling; it produces a reality as latent as active, which only sustains its operative power by hiding behind the curtains.

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In this brief text, we advance mere preliminary notes seeking to analyse the PC discourse as an ideological mechanism; the way it shapes a certain prac-

tice and how that practice produces a system of visibility. As an ideological phenomenon, its function has yet to be clarified. Above, we situated the operative reach of the PC discourse between a double discursive deflection: the bureaucratic and market driven distortion of the violence that permeates our everyday life. This is a good starting point, since it allows us to delineate an area of convergence between the potential offended and the actual subject to violence. To convert the actual sufferer of violence into the target of a verbal offence therefore seems to be the first ideological function of political correctness. Through this transformation, which is generated at the level of perception, we place ourselves within a perverse circularity where the vulnerability of the “more vulnerable” groups of society does not result from uneven power relations, based on coercion and exploitation, but is seen as a consequence of the verbal externalization of an incorrect subjective and cultural identification, based on stereotype and prejudice. For the circular movement between the vulnerability of the minority and the prejudice of the majority to be closed, the conversion of the subjected to violence into the subjected to offence has to tend towards the reduction of the former to the latter. Inside such ideological field, members belonging to particularly vulnerable groups, such as women or black people, are essentially victims of prejudice. Here, discrimination is not a consequence of antagonistic relations between classes or social groups, but the result of a distorted representation based on preconceived ideas. The movement of reduction goes from prejudice as a cause to offence as an effect. Accordingly, the

dominant class is transformed into a diffuse majority defined as the social group that perceives poorly and hastily. When its protocol is not properly observed, the operation of reduction performed by the PC discourse becomes particularly patent. In such cases where the PI emerges, the offender is “naturally” taken as the subject of violence since the verbal offence of racist or sexist content is automatically attributed to the racist or sexist. Here, is not possible to see a chance of redemption for the offender or to consider racism or sexism outside the frame of the offence. The mechanism of reduction makes the offence the irrefutable evidence of the prejudiced character of the offender and, more importantly, demonstrates the beautiful nature of those who know how to say the right words to the right people. According to such circular logic, the racist or sexist is the one who offends. Conversely, there is no racism without a racist offence, nor a patriarchal society without a sexist offence. Following a certain theoretical tradition, the twofold mechanism of conversion and reduction is called fetishism. The double articulation of PC fetishism makes us reformulate the economy established between everyday (omni)presence (naturalization and invisibility) and topological manifestation (linkage and vanishing). Through the double process of conversion and reduction, the PC discourse is not partially invisible because it is present everywhere or because it is manifested within a certain discursive situation, but because it takes the part for the whole. In other words, the cultural naturalization of political correctness does not imply its diffuse extension across our everyday life, but the fixation of certain discursive

phenomena that, when inscribed within a given situation, occupy a predominant position in our everyday life. Hence the importance of terminology within the PC discourse, linking discursive “good practice” to the correct use of the right term for a given situation. The term performs here the role of condensation point, that is, of fetish. In a sense, the ideological efficacy of the PC depends more on the invisible occupation of a given discursive space than on its illusory character (conversion of violence into offence). Doing away with class antagonisms and relations of violence performed at the level of linguistic content plays a crucial role, but it is of little worth if that exclusion does not also occur through the domination of the space where that content is voiced. Ideology follows the maxim “if you repeat a lie often enough, it becomes the truth”, because its “truth” is forged in the space occupied by repetitive utterance. What is more, the assaults aimed at the PC discourse prove its predominant position within a given discursive space. The most common criticisms made to the PC, usually coming from the liberal right, accuse the guardians of political correctness of being a kind of “language police” (usually belonging to the liberal left), that seriously hinders freedom of expression. No matter how pertinent this debate is, it boils down to the right to offend or not to be offended within liberal societies, excluding the possibility of considering a subject of violence beyond the subject of the offence. The premises of the debates around political correctness are, from the start, informed by the territory occupied by the PC discourse within the public space. In this sense, they are an instrument for its

reproduction. Likewise, we should not consider political incorrectness as opposed to political correctness, but as a deviation from the norm that keeps it alive. Thus, the occupation of a discursive space does not result from the slow, natural cementing of acquired habits, small rituals and ways of interacting; it requires persistent and active reiteration, which cannot be carried out without a whole material apparatus of circulation, dissemination and resonance, that is, without a full media and communication machine that produces, reproduces and amplifies it. Therefore, the topographic model mentioned before to does not function solely within the subjective field, since it is enveloped by a material, objective apparatus that ultimately gives it a body and a soul.