



Political correctness and the power of minorities

Political correctness, once little more than an anecdotal phenomenon associated with interpersonal encounters on American university campuses, has become a ubiquitous companion and a potent shaper of social discourse. Through its anticipatory effects, the trend has long since extended its reach beyond particular instances, and the red lines it creates define what may or may not be mentioned or discussed, carving up the political landscape and circumscribing taboo zones. The upshot is political decision-making that is hamstrung – and the recent election/referendum results returned in mature democracies on both sides of the Atlantic are proof positive of the seriousness of the problems it has spawned.

It is thus high time we looked beyond the day-to-day “noise” to investigate what actually lies behind the political correctness trend. In the context of the legal system, political correctness appears to have become the locus of a new kind of “criminal offence”. This is no legitimate statute enacted by a legislator, however, but “soft law”, created by social pressures, devoid of rules governing the burden of proof or the presumption of innocence, and admitting of no legal redress or properly constituted courts; it is lynch justice, administered by the mob.

bergsicht 27 speaks of political correctness’ “proto-fascist” core.

The second section of the essay analyses the phenomenon through a politico-economic lens; it suggests that democracy, whether parliamentary or direct, facilitates the “management” of minority interests to gain votes in the face of an existing majority, as the *per capita* benefits and costs are asymmetrically distributed. Favouring minority over majority interests is morally “ennobled” by political correctness – indeed, a situation arises in which many minorities can combine to create a majority of the disadvantaged. Political correctness thereby becomes a powerful tool for cohesion – “sufferers of the world, unite!”

But there is a third, socio-psychological explanation for the emergence of political correctness as a key driver of the *zeitgeist*. The highly considerate educational methods used by the post-68 generation seem to have created a cohort of young people whose tolerance for frustration is so low that it “melts away like a snowflake”. It might also be the case, however, that young people with such delicate sensibilities have discovered a new way of interacting in socially challenging (multi-lingual and multi-ethnic) conditions – although any such psychological explanations should be viewed against the backdrop of occasionally brutal sanctions and lynch justice; a new *stoa* would surely take a more “chilled” approach!

A fourth line of inquiry explores the new possibilities afforded by data processing and communications technology. For the first time in human history, it has become possible, thanks to digitalisation, to identify difference (and thus also disadvantage) across the board; now that we can all peer over other people’s virtual garden fences, the stage is set for all of us to see ourselves as victims of discrimination or disadvantage. By the same token, plummeting information and transaction costs have meant that the scope for forming coalitions of purportedly or actually disadvantaged individuals has expanded enormously; the cost of managing minorities in a democracy has hit rock-bottom – and political correctness and active moralising are adding fuel to this fire.

bergsicht 27 suggests that creating “free spaces” in which taboo-free discourse can once again flourish may be one way to escape the straitjacket of political correctness – for a while, at least. It also submits that the view of the majority (or “average voter”) will regain moral weight – and thus political clout – in the not-too-distant future.