

The moral impotence of the majority

bergsicht



CHAPTER 1

Correct if it kills us

A plague is spreading. Creeping in through the backdoor of well-meant codes of conduct, it first took hold in American universities before spilling over to Europe, where it has now similarly cast its pall over public discourse; brooking no hindrance in the corporate world, of late it has threatened to become a ubiquitous companion as it penetrates the remotest corners of society, infiltrating circles of friends, private residences and even families. Imagine the following scenario: a careless comment made by a parent about, say, ethnic problems in the local area finds its way from the dinner table via the school to the authorities responsible for safeguarding children and vulnerable adults (in Switzerland, the *Kinder- und Erwachsenenschutzbehörde*) and this body promptly decides the conditions in said household are suspicious and warrant investigation. Outlandishly unlikely? Melodramatic fear-mongering? Not so fast.

The plague in question is *political correctness* – a pathology characterised by a compulsive urge to record and assess every utterance and/or action proffered by third parties and, given half a chance, to

smear or slander them. Political correctness has become a socio-political process, a true political instrument, a continuation of politics by other means, and, because of its potential to malign, it is at heart *proto-fascist*. This bespeaks a tragicomic contradiction of Dürrenmattian dimensions – for political correctness is rooted in an undeniably *legitimate motivation* to protect and respect those people and groups whose circumstances make them worthy of special consideration. In practice, however, political correctness is having the opposite effect: it is exposing, and even destroying, the genuinely defenceless.

We've all heard of examples. Some, at least, might be cause for amusement, such as the tale of Stanford professor Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, who found himself excluded from certain university functions after mentioning his "gorgeous-looking" daughter in a lecture and, having been reported by a presumably somewhat less enchanting female student, stood accused by the Dean of a "tendency to use language offensive to women". He was reminded – and it is of course the case – that not every woman is "gorgeous-looking", and that such professorial utterances might leave these individuals feeling disadvantaged. Or the request by female law students at Harvard that the criminal offence of rape be removed from the curriculum, as its mere mention could stir up past trauma in victims. Or the guidance issued by various US universities to eschew offensive costumes at Halloween parties, including (but not limited to) the donning of *sombreros*. The wearing of such headgear might prove injurious to individuals of a particular ethnic extraction and would constitute either a reference to racist stereotypes or "cultural appropriation".

An uneasy peace – and difficult new “laws”

In fact, these cases are anything but trivial. If this sort of high-mindedness were a prelude to a substantive public debate about morality, there might be less cause for concern. But the fallout from such political correctness – defamation or outright character assassination – is much more serious; it is not inconsequential when a leading intellectual is shunned and sidelined from university office with no trial and no recourse to the law. We regard the case of Berlin professor Jörg Baberowski as more serious still. Notwithstanding the fact that he is a self-declared “lefty”, the latter has become embroiled in a bitter dispute with Trotskyite splinter groups (yes, that’s still a thing...) and has compounded this by daring to voice an opinion on the refugee issue. He is now effectively being prevented from pursuing his profession, and there is far more at work behind his marginalisation than a gang of unreconstructed reds under the beds. An isolated case? A series of isolated cases? No, and here’s the rub with the political correctness scourge: the regime of fear it engenders creates *anticipatory effects*. As a consequence, socio-political discourse is riddled with *taboos* – topics that may be neither mentioned nor discussed, and where taking up certain positions may prove fatal. While Baberowski’s statements on the refugee question may, depending on your point of view, seem highly questionable, when read in context they are certainly not extreme enough to merit a gag. But if people’s names are to be blackened for adopting even questionable attitudes, how is a political discussion of such topics supposed to come about? A thorough debate cannot simply deny the existence of simplistic arguments and affirmations. Against an increasingly sclerotic backdrop, it is legitimate to ask: can the *demos* (including its less sophisticated members) still even speak on equal terms, have a say, in political matters?

Our tentative conclusion is that, because of its anticipatory effect, political correctness is threatening to hinder or even stifle political debate. And we suspect that it is precisely the proliferation of such socio-political taboos – specifically, the *de facto* impossibility of having an open debate about certain subjects, the absurd view that there is “no alternative” to certain courses of action – that has led to the (for many) shock Brexit decision, the election of the rank outsider Donald Trump and the rise of the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) party in the most recent *Bundestag* elections in Germany. Societies in which people’s opinions and actions are muzzled tend to develop *enormously destabilising* potential. The question of how political correctness should be handled is thus very germane. In this edition of *bergsicht*, we shall examine the phenomenon within its legal and socio-political context and seek, as independently as we can, to explain why the *zeitgeist* has become so receptive to what is ultimately a pre-Enlightenment mode of thinking. Naturally, we also offer a few tips on how to deal with it.

Every social system is an attempt to “fashion something straight”, as Immanuel Kant put it, “from the crooked timber of which humanity is made”. Any such attempt is destined to remain imperfect, resulting in contradictions and tensions, and must thus be continuously refined to suit changing circumstances. There is no disputing the ultimate aim of such strivings, at least: peaceful co-existence with our fellow human beings. (Not even a criminal would cast doubt on this objective, as he too lives from exploiting this co-existence in his own particular way.) How much freedom and scope for development a social system might permit the individual is a more complex question, and depends on prevailing preferences and possibilities. Liberty, in the sense of the greatest possible absence of coercion, only functions if accompanied by responsibility and restraint. If mutual consideration and decency are generally acknowledged practices and everyday customs, fewer rules – and less enforcement – are required.

The possession and use of plastic bags was recently banned in Kenya – an abrupt curtailment of the freedom of its citizens (and of tourists, *nota bene*). The ban would not have been necessary had the “crooked timber” residing locally been a bit more careful with their rubbish; littering is a major problem in many emerging and developing countries. In such places, “prohibition” can be an appropriate and reasonable means of achieving peaceful, environmentally friendly co-existence among neighbours. For countries like Switzerland, such a measure would be going too far, an unacceptable encroachment upon the freedom of the individual – doing the decent thing with one’s rubbish is standard operating procedure here.

Things are not so very different with those sections of the legal system covering the peaceful co-existence of people and groups of people in the narrower sense. Might it be the case – we do not presume to know – that fewer problems with defamation or denigration based on where you come from, etc. arise in those places where they are more careless about dealing with litter? In our legal system at least, there is a highly complex body of regulations devoted to the topic of mutual interaction and consensus; it is accorded – and indeed requires – high priority. Spanning both criminal and civil law, it attempts to strike a delicate balance between individual freedom of expression, protection from verbal or figurative attack, and public order as a whole. The “traditional” offences of impugning personal honour, wilful defamation and insult have recently been complemented with an interdiction of racial discrimination. “Attacks on freedom of faith and freedom to worship”, a

related matter, have been on the books in Swiss criminal law from the very beginning, however.

Over time, the panoply of legislation prescribing peaceful co-existence among people and societies has been substantiated in the real world through case law. Overall, you would think that this body of rules should be sufficient, and you might be tempted to draw the same conclusion when considering analogous legal protections in other civilised countries, such as the USA, for example. And yet this is not the case. Political correctness has led to the creation of *new “laws”* – largely unwritten rules, legislated by no lawgiver. One new “criminal” offence is known as *micro-aggression*: any speech or action that could be construed as injurious. The punishment consists neither of a fine nor (at worst) a few months or years of jail time, nor yet of civil restitution or damages, but is selected instead from the arsenal of social exclusion: the aforementioned loss of university office, for example, the boycotting of teaching sessions, the shouting down of lecturers, right up to bad-mouthing via “shitstorm” – something easily and cheaply orchestrated nowadays, and against which the victim (or “micro-aggressor”) is powerless. There are no court proceedings in this “new normal”; lynch justice prevails, and the mob, which has generally been whipped up online, rules. This newly minted “law” has attained *de facto* absolute sway (rather like the ban on plastic bags in Kenya) and is having corresponding anticipatory effects.

All kinds of statements can be deemed “micro-aggressions”: “great country” might be perceived as offensive by someone hailing from a less privileged corner of the globe, and the same is true of a misdirected compliment, such as “oh, that’s pretty smart” to a blonde, or even the remark that someone is being “overly sensitive”, as this – clearly – is nothing more than an attempt to justify a micro-aggression. Micro-aggressions can also be performed non-verbally (and are then known as “micro-assaults”) – for example, when you take a seat as far away as possible from a homeless person on public transport. Even surroundings can be micro-aggressive, if, for instance, disabled access is so hard to reach that those relying on it regularly experience delays.

As the rulebook of political correctness is complex and constantly expanding, many American universities have drawn up codes of conduct in an effort to help unsuspecting freshmen navigate their studies without coming to grief. “Trigger warnings” are also used to alert students to offensive content in their set texts (such as in Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* or Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, or indeed the Bible); certain universities are even bowdlerising the relevant passages from the literature. Furthermore, in today’s world it is part and parcel of politically correct behaviour on campus that, before any bid for physical intimacy between two undergraduates be made manifest in the real world, the consent of both parties to the ensuing intrusion into the individual’s private

space and physical integrity should be sought in writing. A touch laborious, to be sure, but better safe (and correct!) than sorry.

CHAPTER 3

The attractions of asymmetry

If only it were just a question of keeping the peace! One might learn to negotiate the rules of the newly created “criminal” offences, perhaps even beyond the ivy-clad walls of the quadrangle. But ensuring peaceful proceedings among ever denser and more ethnically/culturally diverse social conditions, as the aforementioned Stanford professor Gumbrecht has observed, is but the thin end of the wedge. The truly explosive potential of political correctness lies in its suitability as a tool for pursuing concrete political objectives – “political” in the sense that, when all’s said and done, we are talking about redistribution within a zero-sum game, i.e. taking away from some and giving to others. The magic word here is the *equality* of supposedly or actually disadvantaged people or segments of the population. It is scarcely possible to mount a moral argument against this aspiration, you see – and in any case, to do so would be supremely politically incorrect. This is precisely what makes the equality argument such a powerful, multi-purpose weapon.

The terms “equality” and “equal rights” are often conflated or confused. In its most fundamental sense, equality refers to the notion that all humans deserve the right to equal opportunity in life (the *égalité* of the French Revolution); “equal rights”, on the other hand, specifically denotes equality *before the law*, i.e. the negation of any acquired privileges. In the political sense of “equal opportunities”, though, the term “equality” can be – and often is – stretched much further to include the active *redressing of real-world differences* between people. The blurring of these two notions (equality and equal rights) began in various legal circles in the Western world during the second half of the last century – and there were of course reasons for this: legislation on equal rights for women in Switzerland was long overdue, and the long wait for actual solutions to racial problems in the USA still continued (and continues to this day?). The idea of reducing the gaping disparities between rich and poor, white and non-white, male and female through active intervention (“positive discrimination” or “affirmative action”) began to gain traction; it started to dawn on people that, without some proactive steps, the transition to new social conditions would simply take too long. “Bussing”, a measure designed to redress inequality between demographic groups and schools, was introduced. The scheme, which involved shipping pupils from privileged areas of a town into less

advantaged districts and *vice versa*, was not only notoriously unpopular, but it proved unsuccessful, driving pupils and teachers alike away from publicly funded schools and contributing in no small measure to the demise of the American school system as it stood. Without wishing to sound in any way malicious, the history of active discrimination – (morally unimpeachable) affirmative action – is probably best described as well-meaning, but ineffective.

Positive discrimination as an instrument of state intervention has nonetheless wormed its way into American politics and enjoys considerable popularity in the Democratic Party. There is some solid logic behind it and the desire to push forward such programmes makes good sense from a theoretical politico-economic perspective. Affirmative action invariably addresses a discrete group of people – minorities. When such measures work (unlike the ill-starred “bussing” project), the gains for this limited number of beneficiaries are substantial. As politics is about zero-sum games, however, there will also be losers; someone invariably has to foot the bill for affirmative action. This “someone” is typically the taxpayer – that amorphous multitude of individuals and companies who suffer only marginal losses through any individual affirmative action initiative, indeed scarcely feel it at all as a rule. Because of this inherent asymmetry of benefit and cost, affirmative action is highly attractive in the hurly-burly of politics; it doesn’t take much to package the systematic management of minority interests into a political agenda.

This is exactly what has happened on the left wing of politics in the USA, essentially among the Democratic Party, over the last few decades, as has been spelled out by the sociologist Mark Lilla in an essay in the *NZZ* of 17.8.2017 entitled *Die Linke hat sich selbst zerstört* (“The left has destroyed itself”): a political majority was sought through the management of minorities and/or their specific interests, with the party evoking the purported solidarity that exists between such disparate minorities and believing it could use the synthesised identity of all those supposedly at a disadvantage to carry it to victory at the election. The fuel and lubricant powering the engine and greasing the wheels of this mechanism has ever been political correctness: not only does it co-opt a higher order of legitimation through its active moralising, but framing policy for those actually or allegedly at a disadvantage is in any case an ennobling enterprise. Indeed, as mentioned earlier, it is scarcely possible to formulate a counterposition to this approach – although Donald Trump, whether wittingly or unwittingly, has done just that: he is political incorrectness made flesh.

In short, political correctness is an excellent and potent *propaganda weapon* in the struggle for a majority within the democratic contest, with the logic being: who on earth could object to help being afforded to this or that disadvantaged group? That the game wound up in defeat for the Democrats in the

USA last year, with Donald Trump being elected instead of Hillary Clinton, is for Mark Lilla the by-product of a “top-down” approach to managing minority interests; the Republicans, on the other hand, did more and better work at their base, and used their avowed aim to “make America great again” to drum up a genuine majority that was not composed of the splintered identities of minorities. This seems plausible and would constitute the mobilisation of the so-called “silent majority”, a group that will grind its teeth in mute anger for long periods – but not forever; Trump’s political incorrectness has moved them to open their mouths.

However different the underlying situation may seem in the USA, the UK and Germany, we feel that the lowest common denominator of a “silent majority” (or, in the case of the AfD, a fairly hefty portion of the population) that is fighting back explains all three of these recent cases of democratic upset. Within the UK circles where such debate takes place, it remains politically incorrect, indeed nigh-on impossible, to discuss both the advantages *and* the disadvantages of Brexit; the topic is off-limits, taboo. The same is true of the refugee issue in Germany or indeed of the question of further deepening within the European Union. But the power of political correctness bumps up against its limitations where democratic rights can be exercised anonymously, i.e. wherever and whenever you have no need to feel stigmatised for your actual point of view. But such in-the-closet sincerity is not sufficient for a functioning democracy; controversial issues should be discussed *before* votes and referendums, with the greatest possible openness and with mutual respect for divergent opinions.

CHAPTER 4

Generation snowflake

If we now look beyond the self-evident attractions and politico-economic rationale of political correctness for those engaged in the cut-and-thrust of the democratic process, we are still left with the question of how such a morally freighted, minority-orientated ideology (or pseudo-religion, if you wish) meets with such broad acceptance, especially among young intellectuals. What *zeitgeist* is at work within it? Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, whom we have quoted above and who has first-hand experience of the worst excesses of political correctness, describes – with some empathy – the current college generation as follows: “I have since seen that the new radical students [...] work in a fashion more concentrated even than that of their predecessors, reading more, and more acutely, and asking more surprising and often more shocking questions. There is no sign of

intellectual rot.” And: “In particular, it struck me for the first time that these college students, with all the infinite variety of their origins, use a tone in their dealings with one another that has dispensed with personal insults.” Gumbrecht suggests that this considerate behaviour is one of two ways of coping with proliferating multilingualism and multiculturalism in increasingly close quarters; the other is to develop an extremely high tolerance for frustration. (Quotations from: *Die Dialektik der Mikro-Aggression* [“The Dialectics of Micro-Aggression”], in the *NZZ* of 10.9.2016; translation author’s own).

“Generation Snowflake”, of which these considerate, ultra-sensitive students are a part, would thus be the bellwethers of a new movement of tolerance, gracing with its gentleness a world that is indeed becoming ever more complex as it becomes more intermingled. So – a kind of *stoa* 2.0? Wisdom, serenity and peace of mind, practised by an especially thoughtful cohort of people on whom an education by post-68ers has left a positive impression? One might be tempted to believe it if considerate behaviour and individual serenity were the only manifestations of political correctness actually encountered in real life; but that is clearly not the case. The proto-fascist practices of exclusion, mud-slinging and digitally induced shitstorms are just as much a part of the picture as the patent double standards that, in American universities in particular, find expression in the hideous extravagances of fraternities and drug-fuelled partying. Any displays of meekness could thus be no more than a means to a (political) end and thus, in some senses at least, “fake”.

Analyses that seek to rely on Barnum statements will not take us very much further, we feel; what is missing is a theoretical underpinning for explanations, and a consistent model that could also be tested empirically. Why on earth should a whole generation suddenly be more sensitive and considerate? What could have driven such a development? While the idea of a new *stoa* emerging as a mechanism for coping with multi-ethnic realities is an appealing one, it does not explain these heightened sensitivities satisfactorily – other motivations must be sought. And this search should not be limited to the narrow confines of American campuses, which are of only marginal relevance for the topic as a whole; instead we should explore the widespread acceptance – indeed the attractiveness – of the perspective of the disadvantaged *per se*. This perspective is now the acknowledged mainstream, the *zeitgeist* as it is experienced on both sides of the Atlantic, and is by no means restricted to ivory towers.

Discrimination, victimhood and entitlement

We have already outlined a politico-economic premise. To recap: political correctness, in many respects yoked to the notion of affirmative action and synonymous with an actively moralistic vision of equality, is eminently suitable for managing a broad – indeed the broadest – range of minorities of supposedly or genuinely disadvantaged persons. Given the politico-economic roots of the asymmetry described, indulging minorities makes good sense in the political tug-of-war for redistribution; equality is the “glue”, as it were, that sticks many different minorities together to form a majority. As we have noted, Democratic policy in the USA demonstrates how such a strategy can work over long periods of time – and indeed, it may well continue to do so in future.

Equality – that is to say, the doctrine of redistributing resources and opportunities for the benefit of the disadvantaged – works on both sides of the pond. It is the common denominator in the otherwise so different interests and attitudes of, say, Muslim immigrants and the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community or other groups of purportedly or actually disadvantaged persons; *sufferers of the world, unite!* In political discourse, the notion of equality helps to turn a hopelessly inchoate situation into a coherent constellation under the banner of justice and fairness. This might go some way towards explaining why left-leaning liberals are so allergic to criticism of anything to do with Islam. The German reporter and author Friederike Hasel recently analysed this issue in a newspaper article (*Ich bin nicht mehr links* [“I am no longer on the left”], in *Die Zeit* of 19.4.2017) that has kicked up quite a stink.

So far, so good – or rather not so good, as experience has shown that social constructivism in the guise of equal opportunities does not work. Karl Popper’s take on the trade-off between equality and freedom was that every social system must decide the relevant levels of each for itself. Friedrich August von Hayek devoted a whole volume of his opus *Law, Legislation and Liberty* to the incompatibility of freedom and material equality, speaking of an illusion – “the mirage of social justice”. The empirical results of Soviet experiments in social economics are unambiguous; nonetheless, we shall presumably have no choice but to accept that, where structural means are available, governments will continue to strive for the impossible. And the result? Absurdly high public debt, burgeoning bureaucracy and restrictive regulation. This too has politico-economic roots and can be predicted; it is not for nothing that Hayek spoke of the “Road to Serfdom”.

However, this still leaves us with the question of where this great affinity – quickening not just

amongst young university students, by any manner or means – for feelings of disadvantage and victimhood might originate. What is *really* behind this unmistakable *zeitgeist*? Those who feel disadvantaged and thus also victimised must first be *conscious* of the fact that they differ from others. Without this awareness, they cannot become a stone in their own shoe. In other words, transparency and discrimination (in the economic sense) are pre-requisites for any realisation of disadvantage or victimhood; and one thing we have certainly experienced over the last few decades is a global explosion in respect of both of these. Thanks to modern modes of communication, everyone – whether they live in the furthest backwaters of the Hindu Kush, Transnistria or up a tree in the back of beyond – now knows how things look elsewhere; how the people in Paris, or London, or New York live, for example. But that is not all: the endgame of this whole technological Great Leap Forward has always been predicated on teasing out specific groups from the melting pot of human society. It is all about discrimination, i.e. the establishment of difference, ultimately drilling down to the level of the single individual. In particular, though, the chances of “victims” connecting and forming communities of the “disadvantaged” has risen enormously, thanks to dramatically lower information and transaction costs; or to put it another way, *the cost of coalition* has plummeted. A minority can now be formed for next to nothing, on a global scale if need be.

We suspect that behind the *zeitgeist*'s affinity for disadvantage and victimhood there lurks the knowledge – now suddenly available to all in abundance – of one's own situation and difference from others. Technological progress has turned an inert, unnumbered throng (about whom – at best – prejudices were nursed) into interesting individuals that can be differentiated; objects that are capable of feeling singled out and disadvantaged, indeed almost feel obliged to – we all know someone who is just a touch better off than ourselves, and we envy them just a tiny bit, don't we? Put bluntly, the technological revolution has made potential victims, casualties, sufferers of us all – in the strictest sense of the word, we have all experienced discrimination.

The systems we have created know more about us than we do ourselves: what we like to eat, when, where and with whom we sleep, and for how long – where we would like to go on holiday, what films and books we prefer, how our physical prowess is shaping up. How well we drive our cars. Where we conduct our financial transactions. What insurance we are yet to acquire. Which wine we should order. What socks other individuals with similar personality profiles habitually order. Having been plucked from the primordial soup of anonymity, the individual is beginning to issue his demands; having tasted the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, he now knows how different he is from his neighbour – and, quite possibly, how much worse off – and he wants a larger bite of

the apple. Or so the argument on one side goes.

On the other, the almost unlimited potential for discrimination supplied by technology has awakened fears and is eliciting a backlash. A political desire for redress or equalisation does not adequately explain the political correctness wave we are witnessing, however; there are more – and more important – things at work here, and this is what makes it such a powerful element of the *zeitgeist*. Political correctness may well be a *counter-reaction* to the straitjacket of *traceability* that is tightening around the individual, tracking every predilection, preference and practice. The snapshots we can take of society, groups and individuals have become so uncannily sharp that we may now wish to deliberately de-focus in some areas.

Discrimination and anti-discrimination: we have yet to fully understand the socio-political consequences of digitalisation and see at best through a glass darkly. But it would be misguided to presume that, when presented with such transformational changes in their real-world environment, human beings – the “crooked timber” that has proved so highly adaptable throughout history – would not themselves undergo some kind of change.

CHAPTER 6

Create some breathing room!

Anti-discriminatory practices can, in their turn, become extremely discriminatory, depending on the perspective from which they are viewed. Google employee James Damore dared to question the practice whereby, in order to achieve a balanced gender distribution in certain divisions of the company, the bar is set far lower for women than for men. His contribution to the debate got him fired. We have heard reports of large corporate consultancy firms organising application rounds exclusively for women, deliberately ruling out men – in an effort to engineer diversity. Special weekends for members of the LGBT community are offered in some organisations under the same rubric. At another company, candidates were required to state on an application form whether they had a sex change planned in the near future – presumably because this might open up opportunities for positive discrimination and help enhance diversity. While diversity is a consummation devoutly to be wished, people are getting unduly imaginative in their attempts to accomplish it; the end justifies any number of means and has spawned all kinds of strange gimmicks.

However we slice it, as soon as the (plainly justified) quest for the right to equal opportunity for all – irrespective of origins or race, gender or whatever else – tips over into a fallacious belief that humans are

indeed born equal (i.e. with the same intellectual, physical, mental or social abilities), the very notion of avoiding discrimination becomes problematic and any real-world application itself becomes discriminatory. For authorities, courts and businesses alike, navigating the ensuing minefield of internal contradictions may become hazardous; indeed it may threaten their very existence.

Things could get a little bleak for the functioning of democracy and for society as a whole. The runaway train of technology will continue to race towards providing ever sharper images, only augmenting the ability of politicians to single out and exploit notional victims and the disadvantaged, and the *zeitgeist* will do its bit to impart the impression that such victimhood and/or disadvantage is real. The *bonum commune* (essentially the public weal of all taxpayers) will continue to be eroded under such conditions.

In fact, as things stand, the one remaining option we see (for the moment at least!) for evading the clutches of political correctness is the creation of “free spaces”, taboo-free zones; public, open debate has become too dangerous. Regrettably, genuine discussion can take place only behind closed doors – “gated communities” for the exchange of views must be devised. Those wishing to make a contribution would have to submit to a strict code of “opacity”, along the lines of Chatham House Rules, whereby participants are allowed to reveal the topics discussed but are not permitted to disclose *who* said *what*: an excellent and highly effective enabler of dialogue. Such an approach would give every association, every party, every company the right to occasional intransparency.

Maintaining a strictly scientific approach creates a very particular taboo-free, de-personalised zone; the probability of political correctness (which, as we have said, follows a pre-Enlightenment pattern of behaviour) scaling this parapet is slim. Nevertheless, science must know its limitations – potential candidates for inclusion obey the laws not of nature, but of politics. The same might also hold true for ethics committees. Research should be commissioned to investigate whether a bias in favour of political correctness may have crept into the funding of scientific studies. Genuinely independent science is more important than ever – and universities are the right place for such research to be conducted.

Finally, it is crucial that we protect the integrity of the most “anonymous” zone of all – democratic decision-making, the people’s verdict delivered by secret ballot. In this context, we have always found the opinion polls carried out both before and after referendums and elections an irritation; here too, what we are witnessing is nothing more than discrimination, albeit carried out with ever more sophisticated techniques designed to isolate why each and every micro-demographic voted the way it did. More and more bills are being drafted according to the “fine-tuning” principle whereby the focus is not on the underlying issue, nor on solving any problem, but on

the chances of gaining a majority by scratching the back of this or that group. The result is unstructured, largely opaque bills, as we recently experienced in Switzerland with pension reform; in the end, it was hard to know precisely what one was voting for. Seeking a majority by cobbling together every imaginable (and unimaginable) ragbag of minorities is a trend that is spreading, not just in parliamentary elections but also – and especially – in direct democracy; and it works when the mainstream, morally buoyed by political correctness, plays along – up to the moment the silent majority opens its mouth...

As far as the future functioning of democracy is concerned, there is no question that deploying political correctness to systematically pander to minorities with a view to achieving a majority creates an asymmetry – and that this needs to be corrected. The “public weal”, the *bonum commune*, the common interest of ordinary citizens, the moderate constitutional state that voluntarily reins in its excesses, needs a new moral underpinning of its own; in the long term, it cannot be that outliers alone are assigned a higher moral value. We are still awaiting a political force that represents this kind of morality; Donald Trump or the AfD are certainly *not* what we have in mind. Renewal must be born from the political centre of “non-minority” citizens – that would be the logical response to the rise and rise of political correctness.

We do not wish to conclude this *bergsicht* without taking a look at the world of business that is closest to our heart; boardrooms are not immune from taboo, far from it. Whether organisations are strictly hierarchical or flat, conversational culture can quickly come a cropper for reasons of group dynamics: there are dependencies, friendships, old school tie networks, concealed (and indeed open) conflicts of interest. And yes, even in businesses, politically correct and incorrect subjects or remarks are not unknown; they may stem from problematic decisions hanging over from the past, the hobbyhorses of important decision makers, a tried-and-trusted (but superannuated) corporate culture, supposedly unassailable precepts, unwritten rules and so on. And yes, the strictures of political correctness that prevail without are also projected within – which need not be a bad thing, by the way, if one considers the still untapped potential of women on management boards, for example.

The sauce fit for the goose of society is equally to be recommended for the gander of corporate management: create some breathing room! Take off the tie! Organise unminuted debates, fireside chats, impromptu get-togethers in creative surroundings. Encourage “stupid” questions. Make a point of targeting thorny topics such as passing the baton of power to the next generation. Find out about practices in other companies. Have the occasional secret ballot, even in committees of the utmost mutual trust – it can produce astonishing results and insights – but be sure to return to discipline and order wherever decisions have to be taken and implemented.

*

So, what does all this boil down to? Quite simply, that decisions may continue to be made in an ambience free of *angst*, that choices be made without prejudice, untrammelled by phony constraints. Ultimately, the remedy for the plague of political correctness is to be found in independent, free thought – and in those with the courage to let it spread its wings.

KH, 9 OCTOBER 2017

Translated by: Richard Hall (motif.ch)

—
M1 AG
P.O. Box 344, Museumstr.1
9004 St.Gallen – Schweiz
Phone +41 (0) 71 242 16 16
Telefax +41 (0) 71 242 16 17
info@m1ag.ch

—
Subscribe: www.bergsicht.ch