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Laughter is Bourgeois!

The Origins Of Political Correctness
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LAUGHTER IS BOURGEOIS: The Origins Of Political Correctness

Vancouver's New Left had gathered and were in the midst of an intense discussion. As the Maoist rhetoric flowed thick and fast several Yippies started giggling uncontrollably. A young woman berated the long-hairs and declared that "Laughter is Bourgeois!"

PART 1 - THE ROOTS OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Political Correctness was around for many years before the mass media caught on. It is definitely not an invention of the late 1980s as many people seem to think. I recall hearing the term almost 25 years ago, used to describe the very sort of priggishness and authoritarianism encountered in the young woman who thought it bourgeois to laugh.

Political Correctness was an insulting term to most of us. But early-format PC did harm the movement. There were certain things you would not dare to speak or write about. Or real opinions could only be aired among our closest friends, for if it came out that you thought Mao a mass murderer, the Black Panther Party a bunch of gangsters or that certain fringe feminists were female fascists, you would find yourself attacked as 'reactionary', 'racist' and 'sexist'. And there was no place in the leftist counter-culture for anyone having to live under the burden of those epithets.

Political Correctness wasn't just one of those regrettable spin-offs from the New Left like terrorism or neostalinism. The roots of the affliction go back much further, through Stalinism and Leninism and beyond to the 19th Century workers movement.

Authoritarianism Within the Workers' Movement

Two aspects of the workers' movement reflected the dominant culture and helped give rise to PC. From science came the now discredited concept of Positivism - the idea that nature and society could be understood through the discovery of so-called absolute laws. Positivism applied to politics gave the illusion that a very narrowly defined course of action, later to become known as the 'political line' could be worked out in advance by theoreticians. The political line was 'correct' and those who disagreed were deemed ignorant and obtuse.

From the Christian religion came notions of sin, guilt and black and white moralism. One's opponents were not merely wrong, but also wicked, and every issue could be sharply defined in the most simple-minded Manichian fashion - progressives versus revolution, etc., Secularized Christian moralism fostered sectarianism and intolerant attitudes within the workers' movement.

Nonetheless, the democratic attitude prevailed. Edouard Bernstein was denounced as a 'revisionist' (note carefully the religious terminology) but remained within the Social Democratic Party. Even his most vociferous critics would never have thought of silencing or expelling him. The conflicts within the anarchist movement are an even better example of this tolerance. An important debate between the anarcho-syndicalist militant, Pierre Monatte and the anarchist revolutionary, Enrico Malatesta took place in 1907. For Malatesta, syndicalism was a threat to anarchism, for Monatte it represented the modern form of the libertarian movement. Two very divergent views, but neither man stooped to character assassination or crude insults. The World War was also a source of much bitterness and divisiveness among libertarians. Yet in 1919, the anti-war syndicalist Alphonse Merrheim worked along side the former pro-war syndicalist

Leon Jouhaux. Kropotkin also supported the Allies, but was soon forgiven by the anarchists. Not only could a person have different ideas, they would even make errors, something the totalitarian mind cannot accept.

Prior to Bolshevism the labour movement strove for unity - workers came together and formed vast organisations, the most advanced of which were the anarcho-syndicalist unions. Here, within the same organisation, cohabited anarchists and revolutionary socialists. Sectarianism existed, but the different tendencies seemed to consider themselves part of the same family, for all were taking part in the working class struggle. The general principle that someone with different opinions had to be destroyed by any means had to wait until the Bolshevik Revolution.

Bolshevism and the 'Correct Line'.

Bolshevism tried to militarise the working class. All members of the organisation had to obey a party line handed down from above by the 'professional' leadership.¹ Other workers' groups not adhering to Bolshevik opinion were considered enemies. Thus socialists were branded 'traitors' or 'renegades' because they held views different from Lenin and his pals. This authoritarian poison began to seep into the western workers' movement after the Russian Revolution.

With the successful coup of 1917 under their belt, the Bolsheviks created the Communist International and set out to take over or destroy such libertarian organisations as the IWW, the CGT, the One Big Union or militant socialist groups such as the Socialist Party of Canada. The amalgam technique was used to undermine support for these groups. All socialists

¹ In actual fact, the Bolsheviks were a highly disputatious and undisciplined lot, totalitarianism really dates from the time of the Kronstadt rebellion.

were deemed 'Mensheviks', who in turn, were all condemned as right wing (even though many Mensheviks were as revolutionary as the Bolsheviks) The Mensheviks were also Social Democrats (responsible for killing Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Leibknecht) The anarchist sailors who rebelled at Kronstadt were linked with, and denounced as, 'white guard reactionaries'.

Stalinism refined the Leninist techniques into a brutal art form. With Bolshevism, intolerance and vilification were reserved for party opponents, with the advent of Stalin the persecution turned inward. Any deviation from the party line, no matter how insignificant, was equated with treason. Party members tried to second guess the party line (which changed with Stalin's whims) and often failed to do so quickly enough, ending up, like the Bukharinites and Lovestonites, as 'enemies of the Soviet Union.' The amalgam technique got full use. - Both anarchists and fascists hate the USSR. - QED, anarchism is really fascism. Hence 'anarcho-fascism', social fascism', and please lets not forget 'Trotskyite fascism'. The greatest vilification as aimed, not at the bourgeoisie, or even social democracy, but renegade communists and most especially the poor Trotskyists. To a normal human mind this seems bizarre, given the fact that Trotsky's followers actually supported the Soviet Union.

Outside of the Workers Paradise, with the unhappy exception of Spain, the Stalinists were generally unable to enforce ideological correctness through torture and murder, so more 'subtle' methods of intimidation were used. Should some left-wing militant speak out in criticism of the Little Father or even dare to suggest the Moscow Trials weren't entirely cricket, he would immediately be damned as a fascist reactionary, or at least an agent of Anglo-French imperialism. This unlucky person would then be socially ostracised, and anywhere the CP had influence, his life would be made difficult. Important

figures in the world of arts, politics, labour or academia would find themselves the focal point of all the slanders that the Stalinist propaganda machine could invent. (Consider the fate of George Orwell's masterful exposure of Stalinist treachery, HOMAGE TO CATALONIA)

Given this behaviour, one wonders how the Communist Party was able to find members, but it is necessary to remember the type of person who was attracted to 'communism'. Aside from France and Italy, the CP had little support among the working class, tending to attract people from the upper middle classes, the 'well meaning' sort concerned about the 'poor', such as clergymen, academics, journalists, artists and social workers. There was also a large contingent of those bohemian types Orwell sneered at as 'sandal and fruit-juice socialists'. These people brought all their neurotic baggage with them: disdain for working people, whimpering guilt and an insufferable level of self-righteousness.

Nowhere were these attitudes more prominent than in the United States. Here the Puritan background of American culture with its attendant Manichism played an important part. Political Correctness could only develop from a society which tends to divide all issues into moralistic contests between 'good guys and bad guys'.

One of the earliest instances of PC in its present form is found in Howard Fast's autobiography. The year was 1948 and Fast had written an article in the Daily Worker about a picnic in upstate New York. He mentioned that a large group of 'Negro boys and girls' were among the young people present. Shortly after the paper appeared on the news-stands, Fast was hustled in front of the party brass and given a thorough dressing-down and threatened with expulsion. Why? In those days 'boy' was a common derogatory term for an African American man, and therefore the Stalinists thought it

inadmissible to use at any time in reference to a black person. In the future, Fast was only to write of 'Negro Youth', not boys and girls. With this anecdote we leave the shrinking and festering Communist Party USA and examine the role of the New Left in the development of Political Correctness.

Political Correctness and the New Left

The Civil Rights Movement, the fears of nuclear annihilation and the stirrings of revolt against the 'buttoned down' '50s helped give rise to the phenomenon known as the New Left. (I am referring to the North American New Left, not the British or French New Left, movements which developed somewhat earlier) Inspired by Camus, Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Paul Goodman and the Beat Generation, New Leftists despised dogma and constantly questioned their beliefs. They talked of a need for consensus, non-violence and 'participatory democracy'. The early New Left was essentially libertarian, but this was not to last, for a contradiction existed within the movement which was to cause its demise.

Macarthyism, as one might expect, created sympathy for its victims. This brushed off on the remaining 'Marxist' Leninists. American propaganda was often so ludicrous that it made anti-communism seem square and stupid. New Leftists also felt 'beyond' the sectarian disputes of the 'Old Left' such as Leninism versus Marxism, anarchism versus social democracy or Trotskyism versus Stalinism. The result was a mushy and unprincipled anti-sectarianism which welcomed the Stalinists into the student movement and attacked those who wished to exclude them. Anti-anti-communism became an article of faith for the movement. But the cuckoo eggs laid in the student nest soon hatched. It was easy for small ideologically coherent, disciplined groups in intimidate the great mass of non-ideological and anarchic young people. What was once one big happy family became ridden with disputes, often of a

very obscure nature.

Many of the original New Leftists dropped out into the hippie scene, handing over the reins to a younger generation increasingly enamoured with violence and romantic delusions about the Third World. For these youngsters, the strengths of the original New Left - its openness and largely non-ideological nature - appeared as weaknesses. Their answer to the totalitarians in their midst was to out-Stalin them. Hence Gandhi, Paul Goodman and the IWW were replaced by Mao, Castio and the Vanguard Party. Violent posturing and rhetoric became the rage as the would-be leaders of the New Left struggled for 'the correct line'.

Some factions fell into total madness. The upper middle class, guilt-ridden notion of 'white skin privilege' allowed Weatherman to declare that it was correct to kill babies providing they were white infants. Racism was re-defined as criticism of the Black Panther Party. Charles Manson was even lauded as a hero for a brief period. Needless to say, the mass of students who were once sympathetic to the New Left fled in all directions at this sort of lunacy.² What remained was a rump leftist counter-culture, a plethora of Marxist Leninist sects and a tiny handful of terrorists. About this time the term political correctness was used to describe such fanaticism.

PART 2 - POLITICAL CORRECTNESS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

PC has a very negative effect upon the struggles for racial equality, women's rights, peace and environmental sanity.

² at its height SDS had over 200,000 members, after the Stalinist mania drove out the membership, only about 3,000 or so remained in the ML sects and Weatherman combined.

The extremism and authoritarianism of the politically correct becomes a brush with which to tar legitimate dissent. Any sort of challenge of the status quo can be, in the right-wing use of the amalgam tactic, categorised as 'political correctness' and therefore Greenpeace has been slagged in this manner. What next, an attack upon Oxfam and Amnesty International.

Movements grow and develop, adapt and change to new situations by free debate and exchange of opinions. If this does not occur ideological sclerosis results and the movement degenerates into a mess of tiny, irrelevant sects. Political correctness, by halting debate, or at least confining it within the narrowest of frameworks, is thus, destructive of what should be a natural evolution of critical political and social thought.

The Rape of Language

The destruction of language also takes its toll on social change. We need clear and concise terms, and if robbed of them, we lose something. If it were to turn out that many attitudes deemed racist are actually something else, attacking racism is the wrong prescription. The trivialising of genuine oppression by a host of silly euphemisms is another danger. How are the handicapped helped when people break into laughter at a ridiculous term like 'differently abled'?

Terms and concepts initially have clear and distinct meanings. One hundred years ago, everyone knew what was meant by democracy. But rise of totalitarianism and the creation of vast propaganda machines changed all that. Since 'democracy' has been applied to the brutal and murderous 'People's Democracies' as well as 'wars for democracy' the term has become almost meaningless. So too, with other valuable words in our vocabulary. (Such as fascism, socialism,

communism and liberalism) Propaganda stretches terms far beyond their original meanings.

The word racist for example, in its true meaning can only be applied to those who believe human beings can be placed in a hierarchy of superiority-inferiority based upon race. Rooted in biology, one's situation is immutable. No matter how wealthy one becomes or how many college degrees you might have, if a member of an 'inferior race' you are always second class. To have negative feelings against a group because they are poor or because they have a different culture is not necessarily racism - it could also be classism, cultural chauvinism or xenophobia.³ But the PCers (and now unfortunately seemingly everyone) have confused the issue, amalgamating several different problems into a reductionist concept of racism.

It isn't just ignorance that has given rise to this situation. This is the way propaganda works - racism is a much bigger stick to beat your opponents with than mere xenophobia - say the word 'racist' and one immediately conjures up visions of Nazi storm troopers or KKK red-necks. The same thing has occurred with feminist extremism. If the average egalitarian American family is 'patriarchal' what then is the family in Iran or Saudi Arabia? And if sex between men and women is inherently sexist, have we not totally lost the meaning of the word 'sexism'?

Combatting The Plague

The majority of those have stood up to the bullying of the

³ For a cultural chauvinist, the 'inferior' person is deemed worthy of respect when he adopts the dominant culture. For the true racist, it doesn't matter what the 'inferior' do in terms of improving their education or position in life, they are unalterably and eternally second class citizens because of their biology

politically correct have been conservatives or right wing libertarians. This comes as no surprise, not being from the leftist camp, they have nothing to lose. Free thinking leftists tend to cower in fear, saying what they really think among their friends. No one can blame them, who wants to be insulted or threatened with expulsion from one's social group? The tendency that should be at the forefront of the struggle against the new totalitarianism is the anarchism. The average student or worker supports neither the racists nor the PC fanatics, but despises them equally. If anarchists were to promote freedom of speech and opposition to racism and sexism they would create an opening to the average decent person of this new 'silent majority'. Thus, in combatting PC, we would also be helping to build the movement. The alternative, that of coat tailing the PC left as some so-called anarchists have done, would be a monstrous betrayal of principle and a virtual (and justified) guarantee of permanent marginal status.

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