

Political Correctness and the Future of Society

by Peter Smagorinsky, The University of Georgia

I think the big problem this country has is being politically correct. (APPLAUSE) I've been challenged by so many people, and I don't frankly have time for total political correctness. ~Donald Trump, Republican Debate, Cleveland, OH

[I recently wrote in defense of political correctness](#) on college campuses. In that essay I made the general argument that by promoting the thoughtful consideration and understanding of the lives of others, universities are helping to meet their mission of inquiring into the nature of things and arriving at deep knowledge that undermines stereotypes, which are the basis of many forms of prejudice and humor.

I would like here to explore the long-term consequences of political correctness, [defined here](#) as “showing an effort to make broad social and political changes to redress injustices caused by prejudice. It often involves changing or avoiding language that might offend anyone, especially with respect to gender, race, or ethnic background.”

I can't predict the future. I can't look ahead to understand the consequences of today's politically correct efforts to make life more dignified for marginalized populations, those who have historically been the objects of societal stereotype and accompanying assumptions of inferiority. Many in the U.S. are disturbed by the “politically correct” manner in which these assumptions are now being challenged in universities, schools, and society at large.

Because I have not yet visited the future, I'm going to look back at some disturbances to societal norms that, in their day, were undoubtedly viewed as politically correct by the status quo. In turn, I'll ask readers to decide if those who advocated for the disenfranchised were instituting a “system of left-wing ideological repression,” [as many believe today](#) of politically correct thinking.

Just a century ago, women were denied the right to vote in national elections. The reasoning included the following. My examples come from a British source, but are indicative of American attitudes of the era, given the parallel suffrage struggles of the time:

1. Women would be corrupted by politics and chivalry would die out
2. If women became involved in politics, they would stop marrying, having children, and the human race would die out
3. Women were emotional creatures, and incapable of making a sound political decision.

To think or say otherwise was what we would now consider to be political correctness. As the [1980s school textbook](#) from which these examples are taken goes on to say, “These reasons may seem ludicrous to us, but at the time were taken seriously by a wide cross-section of women as well as men.”

In my view, that’s the essence of the value of political correctness of the type I’m concerned with here: It may seem wrong and impositional at the time to those who already have power, but in retrospect the assumptions behind the politically correct critique become engrained in society’s thinking as the attitudes behind the repressive policies are disproven over time.

That’s what happens as societies become better informed as part of their collective evolution: One era’s politically correct objections become later generations’ factual assumptions.

The American suffrage movement, incidentally, was not without its own issues concerning political correctness. Many of its leaders held racist assumptions, given that there was competition between two disenfranchised groups, women and African Americans, for an expansion of the rights of citizenship.

[Author Lori Ginzberg’s biography of Elizabeth Cady Stanton](#) reveals that the formidable suffragette “demanded—in the true liberal tradition—access to the mainstream of American society in terms of professions, education, law, politics, property and so on. But when she said 'women,' I think ... that she primarily had in mind women much like herself: white, middle-class, culturally if not religiously protestant, propertied, well-educated. And my disagreement with Stanton is that she ... came to see women like herself as more deserving of rights than other people.”

Ginzberg continues, saying that Stanton “talked about how much worse black men would be as voters than the white women about whom she was concerned, and she was really quite dismissive of black women's claims. ...

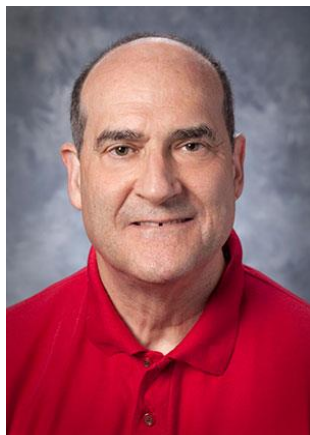
There were some comments about, 'What will we and our daughters suffer if these degraded black men are allowed to have the rights that would make them even worse than our Saxon fathers?'"

Undoubtedly there were people who would dispute Stanton's views about the fitness of Black men and women to vote and participate freely in society. Just as women were thought to be too emotional to think straight, she appeared to find Black people too "degraded" to enjoy the full privileges of citizenship.

Over time, society has rejected both the assumption that women are too weepy to vote and that Black people are too abject in acculturation for full citizenship rights. The vigorous contestation of these debilitating assumptions, once the province of the politically correct, has produced a nation that is now more fair and balanced.

But not entirely fair and balanced, as the ongoing emergence of politically correct perspectives illustrates. As recently as 2003, [Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia](#) opined that by changing sodomy laws, we as a nation were headed down the slippery slope toward LGBTQ marriage rights. And yet, these rights are now guaranteed, Justice Scalia's ongoing protestations and [charges of political correctness](#) notwithstanding.

Upsetting the social order is disturbing to those who have something to lose when someone else is awarded what, in retrospect, is a fundamental right of citizenship. If political correctness on campuses and in the broader society is among the tools that help to construct a more equitable nation, then I think that it has value. If 2115 rolls around and our society has continued on its pathway to realizing the ideals expressed in our founding documents, my ghost won't be surprised to find that today's political correctness has been a factor.



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