

Political Correctness: A Philosophical Inquiry ^(*)

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Abstract

In recent decades, political correctness has emerged as a contentious and widespread issue in global political and social discourse, influencing policies in numerous contexts. The rise of political correctness has also increased political and intellectual criticism, especially from those who see it as an unjustified and inefficient restriction on free speech. The term's enduring significance and the lack of literature on political correctness's normative foundations makes an analytical study of it relevant. This study intends to explore the term within the framework of political philosophy. While the study primarily aims to be explicatory it will also endeavor to present an argument that enhances the comprehension of political correctness as a normative appeal. This work explores normative references to political correctness, concluding that equality and non-discrimination are central values. However, in terms of speech the type of equality that would be pursued could not be found in the arguments who favor equality over freedom of speech. In this direction, then, this article aims to explicate and discuss how political correctness, as a norm, can be understood first as an effort for equality. Secondly and more specifically, it will be proposed that political correctness should be seen as an outgrowth moral effort resulting from the fusion of theories of recognition and epistemic justice. As such an effort, political correctness functions as a norm of granting recognition to others on equal terms while adjusting language by taking their differences into account. Being an effort of epistemic justice, it also aims to eliminate prejudices and stigmatization from language of dominant groups to give equal voice and opportunity of correct self-expression to those who are marginalized and oppressed.

Keywords: Political Correctness, Freedom of Speech, Equality, Recognition, Epistemic Injustice.

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Politik Doğruculuk: Felsefi Bir Soruşturma (*)

Ali EKMEKÇİ (**)

Öz

Son yıllarda, politik doğruculuk dünya çapında siyasi ve kamusal alanda tartışmalı ve yaygın bir konu haline geldi ve politikaları etkiledi. Politik doğruculuğun yükselişi, özellikle onu ifade özgürlüğü üzerinde haksız ve gereksiz bir kısıtlama olarak görenlerin politik ve entelektüel eleştirilerini de artırmıştır. Terimin süregelen önemi ve politik doğruculuğun normatif temellerine ilişkin literatürün eksikliği, bu terime ilişkin analitik bir çalışmayı önemli kılmaktadır. Bu çalışma, terimi siyaset felsefesi çerçevesinde incelemeyi amaçlamakta ve öncelikle açıklayıcı olmayı hedeflemektedir; ancak aynı zamanda normatif bir söylem olarak politik doğruculuğun anlaşılmasını geliştirecek bir argüman sunmaya çalışacaktır. Bu çalışmada politik doğruculuk kavramının normatif referansları incelenmiş ve eşitlik ve ayrımcılık karşıtlığının merkezi değerler olarak ortaya çıktığı sonucuna varılmıştır. Ancak, ifade özgürlüğünden ziyade eşitliği savunan argümanlarda, ifade özgürlüğü açısından nasıl bir eşitlik arayışı içinde olduğu tespit edilememiştir. Bu doğrultuda, bu makale, bir norm olarak politik doğruculuğun öncelikle eşitlik çabası olarak nasıl anlaşılabileceğini açıklamayı ve tartışmayı amaçlamaktadır. İkinci ve daha spesifik olarak, politik doğruculuğun tanınma ve epistemik adalet teorilerinin birleşmesinden kaynaklanan bir ahlaki çaba sonucu olarak görülmesi gerektiği iddia edilecektir. Böyle bir çaba olarak, politik doğruculuk, farklılıklarını hesaba katarak kullanılan dili değiştirirken başkalarını eşit şartlarda tanıma normu olarak işlev görür. Epistemik adalet çabası olarak, aynı zamanda, marjinalleştirilmiş ve ezilenlere eşit söz hakkı ve kendini doğru ifade etme fırsatı vermek için baskın grupların dilinden önyargıları ve damgalamayı ortadan kaldırmayı amaçlamaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Politik Doğruculuk, İfade Özgürlüğü, Eşitlik, Tanınma, Epistemik Adaletsizlik.

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Introduction

Political correctness (PC), initially arising as a theme within the limited North American university setting¹ in the 80s, has evolved into a contentious and widespread subject in modern political and social discourse for many parts of the world in the last decades. The term, in its popular definition, refers to a set of social practices aimed at avoiding or regulating behaviors -primarily speech- that are perceived as derogatory or offensive to individuals or groups, particularly those considered marginalized, vulnerable, or oppressed.² In this context, political correctness refers to a moral norm that may or may not be codified into a legal standard via particular regulations designed to govern certain behaviors or expressions.

For instance, an entry-level case of political correctness implies the replacement of the noun “chairman” with “chairperson” to encompass women and to balance the roles of men and women in society, at least in verbal discourse. An advanced example might involve firing an employee³ for expressing his opinions regarding the underlying disparities between men and women, so “correcting” or restoring equality in discourse. In that sense, the identification and discourse surrounding language is the essential part of political correctness.

The rise in number of efforts aligned with the norm of political correctness has also heightened the backlash and criticism against it, both politically and intellectually, particularly by those who view it as an unjustified and unfruitful restriction claim on free speech. Political correctness has been implicated in the North American context in the cases such as university speech codes,⁴ corporate diversity training programs,⁵ gender pronouns,⁶ and public debates on cancel culture.⁷

¹ “PC is deemed a primarily American phenomenon” from Thomas Tsakalakos, *Political Correctness: A Sociocultural Black Hole* (Routledge, 2020), 1. ; “Political correctness (PC) (...) as stated by the former British ambassador to the US, “an American import” from Bojana Klepač Pogrmilović, “Europe Will Soon Be Lost to Political Correctness’: Evaluating a Discourse of Political Correctness in the Main Treaties of the European Union,” *Politička Misao* 56, no. 3–4 (March 30, 2020): 107, <https://doi.org/10.20901/pm.56.3-4.05>.

² Waleed Aly and Robert Mark Simpson, “Political Correctness Gone Viral,” in *Media Ethics, Free Speech, and the Requirements of Democracy* (Routledge, 2018). Ian Buchanan, *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (OUP Oxford, 2010).

³ An important case illustrating the tension surrounding the term was the firing of Google employee James Damore in 2017 for alleged behavior of “perpetuating gender stereotypes” due to a controversial note he published. In the note, Damore criticized Google for imposing a policy of equal representation gender-wise in a STEM company which he considered implausible policy and for fostering in the company a “politically correct monoculture that maintains its hold by shaming dissenters into silence.” “Google Fires Engineer Who Criticized Tech Giant’s ‘Politically Correct Monoculture,’” *HR Dive*, accessed November 25, 2024, <https://www.hrdiver.com/news/google-fires-engineer-who-criticized-tech-giants-politically-correct-monoculture/>448866/.

⁴ Paul Berman, ed., *Debating P.C.: The Controversy over Political Correctness on College Campuses*, Reissue edition (New York: Delta, 1995), 215–24.

⁵ Nicole L. Smith and Elise J. Percy, “Diversity Training Methods, Opinions of Political Correctness, and Perceptions of Microaggressions,” *Psi Chi Journal of Psychological Research* 24, no. 2 (2019): 106–12, <https://doi.org/10.24839/2325-7342.JN24.2.106>.

⁶ Pablo De Lora, “Political Correctness and the Right to Free Speech: The Case of Preferred Pronouns,” *Undecidabilities and Law*, no. 1 (June 30, 2021): 133–45, https://doi.org/10.14195/2184-9781_1_6.

⁷ Pippa Norris, “Cancel Culture: Myth or Reality?” *Political Studies* 71, no. 1 (February 1, 2023): 145–74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/003232172111037023>.

In those policies, it is aimed to protect or elevate the status of groups of people, such as Afro-Americans, women and the LGBTI community, or some religious or ethnic minorities. Intensified criticism against political correctness has reached its peak in USA during Donald Trump's presidency and renewed candidacy for 2024 elections. Political correctness has become a significant aspect of political discourse during this period mostly because Trump's⁸ and the important supporters of him, like Elon Musk's outspoken denunciation of concept.⁹ Their denunciation resonated with numerous supporters, viewing political correctness as an infringement on free speech and a tool for discursive domination employed by liberal elites mostly concentrated on media, academia, and technology industries.

Outside of the North American context, global events like increased migration, the emergence of multicultural societies, and the rise of populism and far-right leaders in politics have created a fertile soil for new debates on political correctness in the public discourse. Migration, particularly in Europe, has ignited intense discussions regarding cultural integration, national identity, and the limits of tolerance to people from other cultures. While traditional EU political and legal bureaucracy attempts to uphold policies designed to safeguard and enhance the position of minorities and vulnerable identities, these measures have encountered increasing disdain from other politicians and significant parts of European societies. So-called populist and far-right leaders have often denounced political correctness, positioning themselves as advocates of unrestrained free speech and tackling contentious issues. Geert Wilders, for example, a rising figure Netherlands and European politics, stated¹⁰ that those who have a critical point of view about migration should not "be afraid to be politically incorrect" and state their minds. PC was targeted as one of the main reasons why the EU was unable to deal with the migrant crisis.¹¹ By one member of the European Parliament, PC efforts was considered as the cause of "enormous damage to the safety of women"¹² due to "reluctance of persecuting the crimes" committed by minorities. In terms of Brexit the rise in PC is considered by some as the reason why Brexit cannot be honestly discussed, due to labelling critics of Brexit as "bigots and xenophobes."¹³

⁸ Howard S. Schwartz, *Political Correctness and the Destruction of Social Order: Chronicling the Rise of the Pristine Self*, 1st ed. 2016 edition (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 771.

⁹ "TruthGPT: Musk Working on AI to Counter 'Politically Correct' ChatGPT," *euronews*, 10:25:44 +02:00, <https://www.euronews.com/next/2023/04/18/truthgpt-elon-musk-says-he-is-working-on-an-ai-to-counter-politically-correct-chatgpt>. Accessed 20.11.2024

¹⁰ *WORLD EXCLUSIVE: The First Foreign Interview with Incoming Dutch PM Geert Wilders*, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zKQY7mwFf6s>. Accessed 20.11.2024

¹¹ Nick Hallett, "Muslim Professor: Europe Is Crippled by Political Correctness," *Breitbart*, January 17, 2017, <https://www.breitbart.com/europe/2017/01/17/muslim-professor-europe-crippled-political-correctness/>. Accessed 20.11.2024

¹² *Political Correctness Causing Enormous Damage to the Safety of Women - Stuart Agnew MEP*, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1R4MYTV5F1M>. Accessed 20.11.2024

¹³ Thomas Hunt, "PC Rise HAMPERS Debate and Paints Working Class Brexiteers as 'Bigots,'" *Express.co.uk*, April 3, 2018, <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/940667/Brexit-news-political-correctness-democracy-migrants-border-control-Tony-Blair>. Accessed 20.11.2024

In Turkey, political correctness has not yet become a dominant cultural or political theme; however, it is progressively expanding in response to societal shifts and global trends. Integration, cultural sensitivity, and discrimination have been the subject of increased attention as a result of the Syrian refugee crisis and the resulting rise in the number of other migrant minorities. In the same vein, the increasing awareness of identity-related issues, which include sexual, gender, and ethnic identity, has incited discussions regarding language and representation.¹⁴ A seemingly trivial yet symbolic occasion reflecting such changes was the renaming of the biscuit brand “Negro” to “Nero,” which suggests expanding sensitivity to the historical and cultural implications of certain terms.¹⁵ Although these developments are fragmented and occasionally disputed, they emphasize the gradual integration of political correctness into Turkey’s public discourse, indicating its potential influence on future societal norms.

The Aims and the Outline of the Article

Due to such occurrences in the political and social landscape, political correctness seems to stay as a persistent theme continually shaping public discourse and influencing policymaking in diverse contexts. Consequently, the term necessitates analytical scrutiny and given the scarcity of literature that is particularly addressing the normative underpinnings of political correctness, this study intends to explore the term within the framework of political philosophy. This article primarily seeks to be explicatory; however, it will also endeavor to present an argument that enhances the comprehension of political correctness as a normative appeal used as a claim of restriction over freedom of speech. The article seeks to elucidate the normative foundation of political correctness, namely equality, and strives to enhance understanding through the exploration of related ideas such as recognition and epistemic injustice. By doing that, the article aims to contribute to subsequent studies that will focus on the relationship between freedom of speech and political correctness.

An important concern with the concept of political correctness, for those who want to study it academically, lies in the absence of individuals who explicitly advocate it by its name as a normative ideal. Because the term is predominantly used in a pejorative manner, it is typically assigned to people by its critics. Nonetheless, certain academics have examined political correctness independently as a social and political phenomenon, even in the absence of explicit advocates, and their findings are advantageous for the current study. The absence of proponents continues to pose a barrier for the current study, while it may also be reinterpreted as a potential contribution. Given this limitation, I have broadly explored normative references to the concept of political correctness and concluded that equality and non-discrimination emerge as the central normative foundations within the analyses of political correctness by commentators.

¹⁴ Özatalay, Cem, and Seçil Doğuç. “Perceived Discrimination in Turkey: Types, Agents, Dimensions.” *Eşit Haklar İçin İzleme Derneği*, 2019. <https://www.esithaklar.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/T%C3%BCrkiye-de-ayr%C4%B1mc%C4%B1l%C4%B1k-alg%C4%B1s%C4%B1-Eng.pdf>.

¹⁵ “ETİ Negro’nun adı değişti - *MediaCat*,” December 1, 2021, <https://mediacat.com/eti-negronun-adi-deg-isti/>. Accessed 20.11.2024

From that ground, this article limits its focus to the scholars who advocate for restriction of speech specifically for the sake of equality and using speech restrictions to the favor of the oppressed and marginalized. Through such a focus, it is possible to find some scholars that could be considered as proponents of political correctness in the domain of speech. With this lens, some scholars emerge, like Lawrence¹⁶ and Matsuda,¹⁷ who are called in a study as “post-modern-like advocates of PC who favor regulating speech and behavior to achieve social justice.”¹⁸ In some other work¹⁹ once again Lawrence and Matsuda along with Delgado and MacKinnon are referred as the representatives of “postmodern censorship theory” which implies the regulation of speech “to advance the competing goals of racial, gender and social equality.”²⁰

Although there are such references to equality among the writings of those scholars advocating speech restrictions in favor of specific groups, it is hard to detect in their works a well-articulated approach to equality in terms of speech and how it may be achieved through the regulation of language. It is partially, but critically, due to the absence of clarity regarding the type of equality that those proponents advocate for. Political correctness as a norm might be observed in various applications, such as the preferential policies in hiring or admissions. In such situations, the pursuit of equal outcomes in accordance with the objectives of political correctness may plausibly imply a form of equality that is associated with the equitable redistribution of resources. For that reason, it might be argued for and criticized on material grounds. When it comes to speech on the other hand, the type of equality or equal outcomes that would be pursued should be different in nature and such specificity cannot be found not be found in the arguments who favor equality over freedom of speech.

In this direction, then, this article aims to explicate and discuss how political correctness, as a norm, can be understood first as an effort to equality. Secondly and more specifically, it will be proposed that political correctness should be seen as an outgrowth of moral effort resulting from the fusion of theories of recognition and epistemic justice. As such an effort, political correctness functions as a norm of granting recognition to others on equal terms while adjusting language by taking their differences into account. Being an effort for epistemic justice, it also aims to eliminate prejudices and stigmatization from language of dominant groups to give equal voice and opportunity of correct self-expression to those who are marginalized and oppressed.

¹⁶ Charles Lawrence, “If He Hollers Let Him Go: Regulating Racist Speech on Campus,” *Duke Law Journal* 39, no. 3 (June 1, 1990): 431–83.

¹⁷ Mari J. Matsuda, *Words That Wound: Critical Race Theory, Assaultive Speech, And The First Amendment*, 1st edition (Boulder, Colo: Westview Press, 1993).

¹⁸ Sandra Dzenis and Filipe Nobre Faria, “Political Correctness: The Twofold Protection of Liberalism,” *Philosophia* 48, no. 1 (March 2020): 96, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-019-00094-4>.

¹⁹ Steven Gey, “Case Against Postmodern Censorship Theory,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 145, no. 2 (December 1, 1996): 193.

²⁰ Richard Delgado, “Words That Wound: A Tort Action for Racial Insults, Epithets, and Name-Calling,” *SSRN Scholarly Paper* (Rochester, NY, 1982), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2000918>; Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Only Words* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996).

In terms of its structure, the article will begin with a historical background, tracing the development of the phenomenon and the concept of political correctness. This section will highlight the original features of the term and their evolution over time. Following this, the discussion will turn to the ongoing debates surrounding the definition of political correctness and various perspectives on that issue. A key part of the article will explore the normative dimensions of political correctness that is predominantly based on the value of equality. The article, then, will outline the foundational tenets of recognition and epistemic justice in order to assess their relevance to the concept of political correctness as manifestations of equality. The article will conclude with a synthesis of these discussions, offering insights into the broader implications of political correctness and proposing a new approach to its normative aims.

Historical Trajectory of the PC Phenomenon

Political correctness is a multifaceted term with unclear definitions, yet its historical development and integration into social discourse do not generally generate controversy. Its significance is rooted in historical phenomena that have evolved within political life, necessitating a particular historical and socio-political context for understanding and defining its current presence. Similarly, comprehending the normative objectives embedded in the term necessitates depicting its particular historical and socio-political context.

An early and notable instance of the term ‘political correctness’ can be identified during the communist regimes of Soviet Russia and Maoist China within their political organizations.²¹ In the context of Soviet Russia, “the concept of *partiinnost*” -which translates to “party-mindedness” or “party truth”- “is the most probable originator of political correctness,” according to Ellis.²² *Politicheskaya pravil’nost* (political correctness) has evolved from political party spirit and truth (*politicheskaya partiinnost*). *Pravil’nost* is particularly concerned with the dissemination of ideas and the publishing process, which includes the translation of foreign publications. Its objective is to ensure the preservation of ideological contours by supporting “publications that contribute to the accurate comprehension of life.”²³ The term political correctness, in this context, meant to be in consistence with party line in any matter that can be concern of politics such as education, psychiatry, literature, history.

An inevitable outcome of such initiatives was the alteration of language itself. The novelist

²¹ As a matter of fact, the earliest known reference to the term ‘political correctness’ in the English language dates back to 1793, found in the US Supreme Court case *Chisholm v. State of Georgia*. Since this usage is not inherently linked to subsequent meanings of the term it is not given in the main text. As part of that Court case, in discussions regarding citizens’ rights to sue the state, it is deemed ‘politically incorrect’ to refer to ‘the United States’ as the defendant in such cases. Such references should be substituted with ‘the people of the United States’ to signify that the ultimate authority resides with the populace. The application of the term remained rudimentary. Luigi Esposito and Laura Finley, *Political Correctness in the Era of Trump: Threat to Freedom or Ideological Scapegoat?* (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 4–5.

²² Frank Ellis, “Political Correctness and the Ideological Struggle: From Lenin and Mao to Marcuse and Foucault,” *Journal of Social, Political, and Economic Studies* 27 (2002): 411.

²³ Ellis, 416.

Andrei Platonov, in his works, addresses the influence of Soviet political correctness on language, aiming to illustrate alienation as a consequence of the ideological manipulation of language. In his portrayal, the accurate interpretations of the word are contingent upon the Party's determination, and language predominantly serves as an instrument of ideological rituals. Ellis argues²⁴ that Platonov, prior to Orwell, recognized and satirized the ideological issue of constructing language and terminology to supplant them with politically correct alternatives. In this context, language serves primarily as a means of signaling allegiance to the political regime and the censorship it imposes, rather than as a tool for communication.

China's communist regime, led by Mao Tse-Tung, implemented extensive control mechanisms similar to those of the Soviet Union to suppress dissent and protect communist rule. This was particularly critical for concealing the revolution's humanitarian failures, such as the Great Famine, which caused millions of deaths. Mass propaganda and education systems were geared toward instilling "correct attitudes, ideas, and beliefs" and ensuring "correct political orientation"²⁵ among the population. According to Ellis, the Chinese exhibited an intensified obsession with ideological correctness, partly due to their ideological rift with the Soviets, who had moderated their stance after Stalin. This commitment to strict ideological adherence is reflected in official directives emphasizing the elimination of "incorrect expressions"²⁶ and the necessity of following "Chairman Mao's correct line"²⁷ to sustain revolutionary fervor and proper political direction.

Some analysts suggest that the experiences of the Soviet Union and Maoist China significantly influenced Western thinkers, particularly those who travelled to these nations in search of inspiration for the future evolution of Western political life.²⁸ In conjunction with significant advancements in social rights movements and philosophical endeavors following the Second World War, the emergence of political correctness as an idea began to be noted.

In the West, the term 'political correctness' was to be observed in leftist political circles, starting by the New Left politics of the 1960s.²⁹ As the example of the first use of the term in the contemporary meaning, Toni Cade's *The Black Woman* (1970) is referred in which the sentence "A man cannot be politically correct and a chauvinist too" occurred.³⁰ According to Hughes, when the term left its original living space that is Communist and Maoist regimes by being borrowed into liberal and democratic context it has lost its doctrinaire character and become a sort of anomaly.³¹ Cameron explains that in the 1970s and the 1980s the term was used in ironic and mocking ways by US leftists to criticize people who have the tendency to "become

²⁴ Ellis, 422.

²⁵ Ellis, 424.

²⁶ Schoenhals, 1992, 76 as cited in Ellis, 426.

²⁷ Ellis, 425.

²⁸ Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims*, 4th edition (New Brunswick, N.J: Routledge, 1997).

²⁹ Ellis, "Political Correctness and the Ideological Struggle: From Lenin and Mao to Marcuse and Foucault," 428.

³⁰ Clare Fearon, "Disputes of Offence : Making Sense of the Discursive Construction of Political Correctness" (Thesis, Newcastle University, 2015), 13, <http://theses.ncl.ac.uk/jspui/handle/10443/2983>.

³¹ *Political Correctness: A History of Semantics and Culture* (Wiley, 2010), 64.

over-earnest, humorless and rigidly prescriptive, poking fun at the notion that anyone could be wholly ‘correct.’”³² What started as an approving phrase to value the ideological commitment, evolved later into an ironic expression “to denote someone whose line-toeing was too much to bear.”³³

In terms of ideological content, political correctness did not possess the communist overtones that were previously associated with it when it was introduced in the West, as the West was comprised of liberal democratic societies. The Marxist ideology that was being disseminated was simultaneously being transformed into a more democratic character by political philosophers during the 1960s and 1970s. Ellis posits that the works of Foucault, Althusser, and Derrida, in particular, were pioneering forces in this transformation by focusing on the deconstruction of canonical Western narratives, morals, and language, and by distinguishing themselves from conventional Marxism.

Contemporary Use and Applications

The current meaning emerged as a result of processes launched by new social movements in the 1960s, mainly in the United States. This encompasses the political and legal efforts that abolished racial segregation in public schools in the United States, the African American activism spearheaded by leaders such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, and the broader Civil Rights movement. The Civil Rights movement, focused on African Americans, was succeeded by analogous initiatives for other groups, including women’s rights movements, LGBTQ+ liberation, and campaigns for Native Americans and other ethnic minorities. According to Becker:

“Cumulatively, these movements have underscored the significance of the feminist slogan ‘the personal is political.’ That is, areas of social life that were conventionally taken to be apolitical, such as everyday language, the canon of literary classics, jokes, advertising, norms of politeness, hiring decisions, and sports funding, came increasingly to be seen as potential sites for enacting racism, sexism, and Eurocentrism.”³⁴

During the period, the political arena was defined by a contest for new rights or the recognition of people who have been marginalized or, more severely, oppressed. The unifying factor among the above groupings was the recognition of a shared adversary: “ruling White male elite of American society, or, in some cases, by Western civilization in general.”³⁵ Their fights began to be identified as opposition to many forms of discrimination, including “sexism,” “homophobia,” and extending to “ableism,” “ageism,” and “lookism,” in order to contest all facets of standards perceived as “social constructs.”³⁶

³² Cameron, 1994:19, as cited in Fearon, “Disputes of Offence,” 14.

³³ Berman, *Debating P.C.*, 5.

³⁴ Lawrence C. Becker and Charlotte B. Becker, “Political Correctness,” in *Encyclopedia of Ethics* (Routledge, October 18, 2013), 1337.

³⁵ Martin E. Spencer, “Multiculturalism, ‘Political Correctness,’ and the Politics of Identity,” *Sociological Forum* 9, no. 4 (December 1, 1994): 547–67, <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01466302>.

³⁶ Siegel, 1991 as cited in Spencer, 559.

The primary contribution of new left social movements was to transform the conceptualization of oppression. Contemporary versions of tyranny could not be conceived as a type of oppression similar to the subjugation of Hebrews by the Ancient Egyptians, but rather stems from the “everyday practices of well-intentioned liberal society,” with its roots in “unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols.”³⁷ In her enumeration of the oppressed in the USA, Young mentions women and Black individuals, nearly all ethnic minorities, including Jews, as well as the elderly, working-class individuals, and those with physical and mental disabilities.³⁸

The word “political correctness” gained prominence in public discourse, in particular, due to issues inside universities and the education system in the United States during the late 1980s and early 1990s. The significant initial outcomes of the rise of the term were modifications to university curricula to incorporate diversity and multiculturalism, replacing the works of many cultures and ethnicities in lieu of the traditionally canonized Western texts authored by so-called “dead white European men.” Universities led in the efforts of political correctness by implementing speech codes on their campuses to ban statements that may offend or stigmatize students from marginalized groups.

According to Tsakalakis, the efforts under the name of political correctness are essentially a broad basket of epistemic and moral concerns.³⁹ These are:

“Whether to broaden and diversify the Western canon or not, what is the scientific legitimacy of disciplines and theories that emerged fairly recently (for instance, Women’s Studies, Gender Studies, queer theory, postcolonial theory, and so on), how to act, dress, or speak in the presence of members of minority communities (...) and how to ensure a level playing field for disadvantaged persons (in other words, though this is by no means an exhaustive list, for people who are ‘financially challenged’ [poor] or ‘differently abled’ [physically or mentally handicapped] (...).”

According to Schwartz,⁴⁰ “political correctness is everywhere” at present. This phenomenon notably impacts other elements beyond college diversity initiatives, multicultural curricula, and speech legislation, particularly in Western democracies. It is now pervasive in almost all aspects of both public and private spheres: the political arena, art, journalism, social media, international relations, and everyday social, political, and sexual interactions.⁴¹ In the employment sector, political correctness is manifested through affirmative action rules that favor candidates from historically marginalized groups over those considered privileged. Such efforts have been bolstered by the recent formulation and advancement of “DEI (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion)” policies across various organizations and enterprises, aimed at ensuring

³⁷ Iris Marion Young and Danielle S. Allen, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Revised edition (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2011), 41.

³⁸ Young and Allen, 173.

³⁹ Tsakalakis, *Political Correctness*, 10.

⁴⁰ Schwartz, *Political Correctness and the Destruction of Social Order*, 2.

⁴¹ Glenn C. Loury, “Self-Censorship in Public Discourse: A Theory of ‘Political Correctness’ and Related Phenomena,” *Rationality and Society* 6, no. 4 (October 1994): 428–29, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1043463194006004002>; Tsakalakis, *Political Correctness*, 5.

equitable treatment and full participation for all individuals, particularly those historically marginalized or discriminated against due to identity or disability.⁴²

Debate over the Definition of PC

“Political correctness and its obverse, political incorrectness is more easily recognized than defined,” says Hughes, in one of the most extensive academic works on the issue of political correctness.⁴³ As Fairclough observes, “Political correctness’ and being ‘politically correct’ are, in the main, identifications imposed upon people by their political opponents.”⁴⁴ Therefore, it is almost impossible to encounter someone stating that “one should be politically correct for this and that reason” as a proponent of it. This complexity results in a possibility of defining the phenomenon and the concept not as a proponent but only as an outside observer.

The word “political correctness” is marked by considerable ambiguity and is intricately linked to political discourse, rendering the task of defining it quite difficult. Its informal usage is frequently imbued with political connotations, with instances of positive or neutral applications being infrequent.⁴⁵ Historically, the term has served as a battleground in the conflict between the political factions of the Left and Right. Critics contend that the political Right constructed the concept of political correctness to subvert the Left’s pursuit of equality, portraying it as a mechanism for sustaining control over underprivileged populations.⁴⁶ The phrase has evolved into an insult in ideological conflicts, primarily employed by conservatives to denounce alleged liberal attacks on tradition and civil freedoms, including free speech.⁴⁷ It is characterized as “an ideological narrowing, intolerance, and silencing of dissent, commonly attributed to the left by the right”⁴⁸ and as “a specter largely fabricated by those who urge us to take up arms against it.”⁴⁹

As it is argued by Ford “definitions of political correctness (...) have frequently been assumed from popular culture rather than from a scientific perspective.”⁵⁰ Therefore, here I will put forward several examples for definition of political correctness such from the popular sources:

⁴² See for details: “What Is DEI? The Oxford Review Guide to Diversity, Equity and Inclusion.,” *The Oxford Review - OR Briefings* (blog), accessed November 25, 2024, <https://oxford-review.com/what-is-dei-the-oxford-review-guide-to-diversity-equity-and-inclusion/>.

⁴³ Hughes, *Political Correctness*, 9.

⁴⁴ Norman Fairclough, “‘Political Correctness’: The Politics of Culture and Language,” *Discourse & Society* 14, no. 1 (2003): 21.

⁴⁵ Robin Tolmach Lakoff, *The Language War*, First Paperback edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 92–94.

⁴⁶ Dzenis and Nobre Faria, “Political Correctness,” 96.

⁴⁷ Mary Talbot, “Political Correctness and Freedom of Speech,” in *Handbook of Language and Communication: Diversity and Change* (De Gruyter Mouton, 2008), 751–64, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110198539>.

⁴⁸ Michael S. Cummings, *Beyond Political Correctness: Social Transformation in the United States* (Boulder, Colo.: Lynne Rienner Pub, 2001), 10.

⁴⁹ Stanley Fish, *There’s No Such Thing As Free Speech: And It’s a Good Thing, Too* (New York, 1994), 11.

⁵⁰ Becky R. Ford, “An Empirical Test of the Effects of Political Correctness: Implications for Censorship, Self-Censorship, and Public Deliberation” (UC Santa Barbara, 2017), 17–18, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/12f562b0>.

“The deliberate avoidance of language use and behavior which may be perceived to be either derogatory or excluding of a political minority. Institutions and organizations that adopt political correctness as part of their communications policy thus expressly forbid the use of racist, sexist, and otherwise prejudicial language and require that politically neutral terms be used at all times.”⁵¹

“The principle of avoiding language and behavior that may offend particular groups of people. This term is usually used by people who do not agree with this principle or think it has been used in ways that are not reasonable.”⁵²

“Conforming to a belief that language and practices which could offend political sensibilities (as in matters of sex or race) should be eliminated.”⁵³

A definition that seems most inclusive and systematic is the one given by Moller.⁵⁴ According to him political correctness is:

“The attempt to establish norms of speech (or sometimes behavior) that are thought to (a) protect vulnerable, marginalized, or historically victimized groups, and which (b) function by shaping public discourse, often by inhibiting speech or other forms of social signaling, and that (c) are supposed to avoid insult and outrage, a lowered sense of self-esteem, or otherwise offending the sensibilities of such groups or their allies.”

Certain factors are essential to convey the meaning of the phrase. According to Kitrosser,⁵⁵ “the common denominator among competing definitions seems to be a devotion to recognizing and alleviating the burdens of marginalized groups.” One essential component of a definition of political correctness is the inclusion of certain groups of individuals deemed marginalized in some capacity. The second component is the prioritization of political correctness in the selection of words and their meanings when referring to a targeted group. As it is suggested by Hendley “no area of contemporary society has been more affected by political correctness than language.”⁵⁶

⁵¹ Ian Buchanan, “Political Correctness,” in *A Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2010), <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/acref/9780199532919.001.0001/acref-9780199532919-e-533>.

⁵² “Political Correctness Noun - Definition, Pictures, Pronunciation and Usage Notes | Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.Com,” accessed November 25, 2024, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/political-correctness?q=political+correctness>.

⁵³ “Politically Correct Definition & Meaning - Merriam-Webster,” accessed November 25, 2024, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/politically%20correct#h1>.

⁵⁴ Dan Moller, “Dilemmas of Political Correctness,” in *Governing Least*, by Dan Moller (Oxford University Press, 2019), 242, <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190863241.003.0015>.

⁵⁵ Heidi Kitrosser, “Free Speech, Higher Education, and the PC Narrative,” *Minn. L. Rev.*, January 1, 2017, https://scholarship.law.umn.edu/faculty_articles/593.

⁵⁶ W. Clark Hendley, “What Is Political Correctness? Shifting Understandings as the Media Define a New Ideology,” *The European Legacy* 1, no. 4 (July 1, 1996): 1619, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10848779608579620>.

According to Moller, the point of political correctness is “responding to the sensibilities of marginalized groups by blocking the offending element.”⁵⁷ Consequently, political correctness begins with refraining from using terms that carry negative moral implications within a specific society to refer to a group of individuals. In areas where political correctness is upheld as a principle, the norm of ‘blocking the offending element’ is expanded to encompass remarks, ideas, and criticisms pertaining to oppressed groups.

Normative Underpinnings of PC

The difficulty of defining political correctness is also observed in clarifying its normative aspects. Although several authors addressing the phenomena recognize its normative aspects, they do not specify any one researcher who articulates or underscores the normative basis of political correctness associated with the word. Consequently, delineating the normative foundation of PC can only be accomplished by identifying the aspects that reveal the shared moral implications underlying the endeavors of PC. To accomplish this, I shall initially analyze the efforts of others within this area. An analysis of the relevant literature and primary discourses on political correctness reveals that equality and non-discrimination are central to the predominant interpretation of political correctness and its various manifestations according to many commentators of the topic.

According to Bernstein, inclusive stance of political correctness posits that individuals require moral equality regardless of their race, religion, gender, and this requirement could be enforced through certain policies such as restrictive speech codes, anti-discrimination laws or affirmative action.⁵⁸ Elsewhere, Haidt⁵⁹ emphasizes that political correctness prioritizes equality and concern for others, while Sykes⁶⁰ notes that the counterculture of the 1960s, regarded as a forerunner to political correctness, was similarly characterized by ‘other directedness’. Underlining the politics of 60s as the precursor, Hollander draws attention to “the egalitarian impulse” that has been reinforced and gained institutional support since that era. He also highlights the anti-elitist nature of this impulse, asserting that political correctness not only seeks to elevate specific disadvantaged groups but also posits, in its multicultural objectives, that all cultures are equivalent and that no qualitative assessments should be rendered accordingly.⁶¹

According to several other authors, the concept of political correctness asserts that adopting an objective and neutral stance devoid of gender or racial bias fails to achieve true equality. What is needed is that individuals must consistently evaluate power disparities and historical discrimination when engaging with others and formulating legislation.⁶²

⁵⁷ Moller, “Dilemmas of Political Correctness,” 242.

⁵⁸ David E. Bernstein, *You Can't Say That!: The Growing Threat to Civil Liberties from Antidiscrimination Laws* (Cato Institute, 2003).

⁵⁹ Haidt, 2012

⁶⁰ Charles J. Sykes, *A Nation of Victims: The Decay of the American Character* (St. Martin's Publishing Group, 1992), 90.

⁶¹ Paul Hollander, “‘Imagined Tyranny’? Political Correctness Reconsidered,” in *Discontents* (Routledge, 2002), 40–41.

⁶² Maryann Ayim, “Just How Correct Is Political Correctness? A Critique of the Opposition's Arguments,” *Argumentation* 12, no. 4 (November 1, 1998): 445–80, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1007718113969>; Loury,

The concept is the culmination of efforts to comprehend and address the imbalanced power structure in society that puts some groups to the disadvantaged position.

“Extreme sensitivity and absolute egalitarianism”⁶³ that is considered at the core of political correctness is also interpreted by others as “radical egalitarianism”⁶⁴ for the emphasis on a type of equality that is not based on mere equal opportunities but more on equal results or equality of outcome. Since society is thought to be grounded on hierarchical structure, the idea that granting the same rights and rules to the most and least powerful would always lead to the oppression of some. Political correctness, therefore, aims to enhance the power of underprivileged groups for the aim of realizing equality and non-discrimination.⁶⁵

Another reference to equality comes in the form of ‘equal freedom.’ According to that idea the elimination of offensive types of expressions towards certain groups is legitimate and required to promote the liberties of individuals belonging to those groups. A sort of “repressive tolerance,” which implies restrictions should be applied to privileged groups is necessary to ensure equal freedom for all members of society.⁶⁶

The most direct dealing with the normative characteristics of political correctness in the literature can be found in the arguments of Narveson.⁶⁷ According to Narveson, political correctness involves, in its normative connotations, a ‘politicization’ attempt in the domains of life, public or private, which are not considered in terms of politics. However, it is still not clear in what direction such an effort to politicize works. Only after understanding that direction it would be possible to understand the kinds of normative project that political correctness rests on philosophically. Narveson argues that in order to have such an understanding we need to review the main areas that political correctness aims to bring criticism and change. These are the debates whether there should be a canonical body of literature in universities and education; whether study of certain subjects reflect multiplicity of cultures of contributors; whether the concepts such as ‘truth,’ ‘objectivity,’ ‘impartiality,’ can be reasonably employed; whether some groups that are considered to have been oppressed should be given preference over others as in affirmative action; whether the scope of words that are considered ‘harmful’ or ‘offensive’ should be expanded and be subject to regulation.

To all those questions, political correctness can be considered as a vision that offers some answers. For Narveson, a common motivation can be identified in ‘politically correct’ type of actions in those different areas, which “take shape various applications of a single general idea” and that is “the pursuit of what is claimed to be *equality*.”⁶⁸ Political correctness, then, is the umbrella term of the efforts to rectify such

“Self-Censorship in Public Discourse.”

⁶³ Christine Brophy, “Political Correctness: Social-Fiscal Liberalism and Left-Wing Authoritarianism” (Thesis, 2015), 5, <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/handle/1807/75755>.

⁶⁴ Hollander, “‘Imagined Tyranny?’,” 41.

⁶⁵ Hollander, 69.

⁶⁶ Dzenis and Nobre Faria, “Political Correctness,” 100.

⁶⁷ Marilyn Friedman and Jan Narveson, *Political Correctness: For and Against* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1995).

⁶⁸ Friedman and Narveson, 51.

situations as much as possible in the domains in which similar claims can be made. For Narveson, “the fundamental aim, in short, is *equality of outcome* and the politically correct principle is that everyone has the right to that status, a right overriding any considerations of merit deployed within the offending field.”⁶⁹

For example, in terms of education, this principle is pursued in the efforts of curriculum changes along with some other policy applications to ensure equal representation in the canon or in study materials of those who are considered as under-represented because of historical injustices, oppression, and exclusion. By doing that education is being saved from the possibility of being racist, sexist or discriminatory in some other way. In terms of job market, it is observed in the affirmative action policies and quotas to ensure that enough diversity is achieved in the workplaces. In terms of speech, the norm of political correctness implies that there is certain speech which must be viewed as “manifesting a kind of domination of the hearers by the speakers.” Regulations in language use by speech codes in universities and workplaces and similar arrangements are meant to equalize the communication scene by sanctioning certain forms of expression while promoting the use of other options.⁷⁰

Due to the problem of finding explicit proponents of political correctness in the literature, thus far, I have hovered over the references to equality and non-discrimination among the analysis made by commentators over the concept. Now it may be possible to find scholars who could be considered as proponents, even though they do not identify, by focusing on the scholars who happen to advocate for restriction of speech for the sake of equality and using speech restrictions to the favor of the oppressed and marginalized.

With this lens, there are some scholars like Lawrence Matsuda, who are called in a study as “post-modern-like advocates of PC who favor regulating speech and behavior to achieve social justice.”⁷¹ In some other work, again Lawrence, Matsuda along with Delgado, MacKinnon are referred as the representatives of “postmodern censorship theory” which implies the regulation of speech “to advance the competing goals of racial, gender and social equality.”⁷²

Within the works of mentioned scholars, we can find direct reference to the value of equality as a countervailing value against freedom of speech. While Lawrence states that “at the center of the controversy is a tension between the constitutional values of free speech and equality,”⁷³ MacKinnon agrees by saying that “the law of equality and the law of freedom of speech are on a collision course.”⁷⁴ Delgado and Jean Stefancic further join in this perspective, positing that speech and equality are not independent values but rather “opposite sides of the same coin.”⁷⁵

⁶⁹ Friedman and Narveson, 52.

⁷⁰ Friedman and Narveson, 51–53.

⁷¹ Lawrence, “If He Hollers Let Him Go.”; Matsuda, *Words That Wound*.; Dzenis and Nobre Faria, “Political Correctness,” 96.

⁷² Gey, “Case Against Postmodern Censorship Theory.”; Delgado, “Words That Wound.”; MacKinnon, *Only Words*.

⁷³ Lawrence, “If He Hollers Let Him Go,” 434.

⁷⁴ MacKinnon, *Only Words*, 26.

⁷⁵ Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, “Hateful Speech, Loving Communities: Why Our Notion of a Just Balance Changes so Slowly Symposium: Critical Race Theory: Essays on Hate Speech,” *Cal L. Rev.* 82 (Jan-

For them, the conventional free speech philosophy fails to acknowledge cultural and gender distinctions, as it overlooks unequal power dynamics and operates under the assumption of a free market where all individuals possess equal power. Where there is inequality in the social status of different identities, unfettered freedom of speech will be not just inconsistent with equality but often a direct threat to it. Commenting on the role of speech in the hierarchical and unequal power structure of society, Delgado argues that “free speech is a powerful asset to the dominant group, but a much less helpful one to subordinate groups.”⁷⁶ Delgado further believes that inequality is also found in relation to the status of the target of the speech because “speech which constructs a stigma-picture of a subordinate group stands on a different footing from sporadic speech aimed at persons who are not disempowered.”⁷⁷ Speech is seen as a weapon used to subjugate racial minorities, women, and other historically oppressed groups.

Similarly, according to Delgado and Stefancic, many groups are left out in the process that give to free speech its value: “Blacks, women, gays and lesbians, and others were not part of the speech community that framed the Constitution and Bill of Rights... Later, when they did speak, their speech was deemed incoherent, self-interested, worthy of scorn.”⁷⁸ Within the domain of combat against racism, Lawrence explains that it is necessary to “see equality as a precondition to free speech and place more weight on the side of the balance aimed at the removal of the badges and incidents of slavery that continue to flourish in our culture.”⁷⁹

This imbalance suggests a systemic failure to create conditions where all voices can be equally heard. Advocates of this perspective argue that addressing inequality may necessitate limiting free speech, particularly forms of expression that perpetuate subordination. For instance, hate speech codes on campuses or restrictions on campaign spending by wealthy individuals are seen as mechanisms to “tune down the voice of the rich” and provide disadvantaged groups with a more equitable platform. Some of their proposals are limited to race; others extend to members of other ascriptive groups, but they share the conviction that harmful speech constitutes subordination and that “the remedy cannot be ‘more speech.’”⁸⁰

Although there are many such references to equality among the writings of those scholars, it is not well articulated how equality could be manifested in terms of speech and achieved by its regulation. It is partly, but crucially, because there is lack of clarification for what kind of equality they suggest.

Free Speech and Equality

The discourse on free speech and political correctness ultimately revolves around their potential to either uphold or detract from the principle of equality. Conventional conceptions of free speech, for example as the one firmly rooted in U.S. legal history, promote an “equality of

uary 1, 1994): 856.

⁷⁶ Richard Delgado, “Campus Antiracism Rules: Constitutional Narratives in Collision,” SSRN Scholarly Paper (Rochester, NY, 1991), 385–86, <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=2104287>.

⁷⁷ Delgado, 385–86.

⁷⁸ Delgado and Stefancic, “Hateful Speech, Loving Communities,” 862.

⁷⁹ Lawrence, “If He Hollers Let Him Go,” 467.

⁸⁰ Kathleen Sullivan, “Free Speech Wars,” *SMU Law Review* 48, no. 1 (January 1, 1994): 203.

status in the realm of ideas,” ensuring that every perspective receives an equitable platform for expression. This is seen in the robust protection provided by the laws against content-based limitations on speech, highlighting a governmental impartiality that does not prioritize one viewpoint over another. This method corresponds with the principles of free speech absolutism or viewpoint neutrality, which asserts that for democracy to flourish, citizens must possess the liberty to impact policy beyond electoral periods through unrestricted and open discourse.⁸¹

However, this traditional stance on free speech encounters significant critique from advocates of political correctness, who argue that without some form of regulation, the so-called “marketplace of ideas” becomes disproportionately dominated by those who already hold power in society. From this perspective, the freedom to speak freely does not inherently lead to equality if the voices of marginalized groups are drowned out by louder, more influential ones. Critics like Catharine MacKinnon argue that the current legal frameworks fail to recognize how speech can perpetuate social inequality, pointing out that “free” speech is not equally accessible.⁸² They contend that what is needed is not just the absence of government censorship but positive actions ensuring that the speech of all, especially the marginalized, carries equal weight in societal discourse.

The tension here lies in reconciling the value of free speech with the imperative for social equality. Traditionalists view free speech as inherently supporting equality by allowing all voices to be heard, envisioning a society where ideas compete on merit alone in a metaphorical marketplace. However, PC advocates see this as potentially naive or even harmful if not paired with mechanisms to address existing societal inequalities in influence and access. They argue that without some moderation or regulation of speech, the status quo, which often benefits the majority or those in higher social strata, will remain unchallenged, thus perpetuating inequality.⁸³

The critique from the PC camp goes further, suggesting that equality in speech should be measured not just by the opportunity to speak but by the impact of that speech. They propose that equality might sometimes require restrictions on speech to protect the dignity, security, and equal participation of historically marginalized groups.⁸⁴ This stance challenges the notion that free speech alone can level the playing field, advocating instead for a balance where freedom of speech is adjusted to truly serve the interests of all, especially those less heard.

The discourse on whether traditional free speech doctrines can integrate the principle of equality or if they overlook it entirely is complex. While traditionalists might argue that the very essence of free speech supports equality by providing an open platform, PC proponents

⁸¹ Eric Heinze, “Viewpoint Absolutism and Hate Speech,” *The Modern Law Review* 69, no. 4 (2006): 543–82.

⁸² Catharine A. MacKinnon, *Only Words* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996), 72. *Only Words* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1996)

⁸³ Steven Gey, “Case Against Postmodern Censorship Theory,” *University of Pennsylvania Law Review* 145, no. 2 (December 1, 1996): 283.

⁸⁴ Bhikhu Parekh, “Is There a Case for Banning Hate Speech?,” in *The Content and Context of Hate Speech*, ed. Michael Herz and Peter Molnar, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 45, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781139042871.006>.

are skeptical, suggesting that without some form of speech regulation, the promise of equality remains unfulfilled. They push for a system where freedom of speech does not inadvertently reinforce or amplify existing social inequities but instead actively works towards dismantling them.

This debate highlights a fundamental philosophical conflict about the role of speech in society: whether it should be completely free, allowing all ideas to compete in a supposedly level playing field, or if should be moderated to ensure that this field is indeed level, giving equal consideration to voices that have historically been marginalized. As we delve deeper into these issues, it becomes clear that the reconciliation of these views might not be straightforward, suggesting a need for ongoing dialogue and perhaps innovative approaches to how we understand and implement free speech in the context of equality.

When it comes to speech, the type of equality or equal outcomes that would be pursued should be different in nature than equal outcomes of material grounds. Such specificity could not be found in the arguments who favor equality over freedom of speech. I will contend that the concepts of recognition and epistemic justice could be used to articulate the equality that is pursued in terms of speech. The arguments of proponents of political correctness could be reframed with the help of those concepts. Such reframing is not only helpful but also necessary to understand normative tension between political correctness and freedom of speech for later works. To establish such a perspective, I will continue with an elaboration of recognition theories and epistemic justice which will be followed by the discussion of how political correctness functions as the effort of granting proper recognition and ensuring epistemic justice.

Recognition and Epistemic Injustice

Recognition refers to the favorable acknowledgment of an individual or group's standing, bestowing a normative status and honoring them as moral actors. Proper recognition is deemed an essential prerequisite for a just society, wherein all individuals are regarded as free and equal moral actors.⁸⁵ Misrecognition denotes failures in recognition that adversely affect an individual's political and psychological standing within society.

Scholars concur that the concept "recognition" has gained significance in the evolution of political philosophy. This agreement asserts that after the conclusion of the Second World War, the political landscape, especially in Western nations, saw a shift.⁸⁶ As the connection with economic class diminishes, alternative social movements have emerged that highlight novel forms of identity that do not conform to the traditional left-right spectrum. The defining feature of these movements is their creation of new identities focused on issues such as race, culture, gender, religion, and other comparable societal classifications. Starting from the 1960s, the calls for equality manifested themselves as "demands for the equal status of cultures and genders."⁸⁷

⁸⁵ Mattias Iser, "Recognition," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2019 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2019), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/recognition/>.

⁸⁶ Simon Thompson, *The Political Theory of Recognition: A Critical Introduction* (Polity, 2006), 1–4.

⁸⁷ Charles Taylor et al., *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutmann, Revised edition (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1994), 27.

These demands eventually extended to include any kind of difference that was considered essential for the identity of those who possessed it. Therefore, the contemporary scholarship on equality demands had to turn to the idea of recognition with an enhanced focus on identity and difference.

The alteration in the political landscape resulted in the formation of novel demands for equality, which have therefore been the focus of theoretical contemplation. Therefore, instead of considering equality as only a matter of redistribution, there emerge a new group of theorists who emphasized the social dimensions of equality.⁸⁸ They argue that there are two primary issues that should be opposed in society: status hierarchy and oppression. Despite the absence of overt hierarchies akin to those in aristocracies and the observable deference individuals exhibit towards one another there exist hierarchies defined by nuanced and elusive interactions. Oppression denotes the act of harassing, frightening, and mocking people from subordinate groups only for the goal of humiliation and stigmatization.⁸⁹ Oppression also shows in subtler forms when the prevailing cultural views of the majority dominate, leading subordinates to perceive themselves as nonconforming to what is deemed 'normal'. From the standpoint of these scholars, the primary political struggle to be raised is one against misrecognition. As Honneth suggests, the political struggle in this sense is not about the elimination of inequality in traditional sense, but about "the avoidance of humiliation and disrespect."⁹⁰

The need for recognition by other parties of society is a vital part of human nature which has been acknowledged throughout the history of philosophy. As freedom and equality gained more and more prominent values of social reality, the hierarchical organization of societies began to collapse and the need for recognition also started to become democratized. The demand of recognition led to the expansion of individual liberties and equal rights. As societies became more multidimensional in many senses, such as in cultural, religious, ethnic, gender, formal equality became less satisfied to the need of recognition. Since groups that are diverse enough now coexist, it is argued that treating them equally requires differentiation in the applications of the policies and norms.

The growth of awareness about the distinctions necessarily led also to the rise of negative perceptions of difference such as stigmatization. This concept is further emphasized by some of these scholars since it entails depicting subordinate groups in ways that associate them with negative traits, such as ignorance, criminal behavior, ineptitude, or irrationality.⁹¹ Consequently, another type of injustice is coined by Fricker in the name of epistemic injustice, which is further intensified by negative representations of marginalized groups.⁹² This concept encompasses two primary manifestations: testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice.

⁸⁸ Elizabeth Anderson, "What Is the Point of Equality?" *Ethics* 109, no. 2 (1999): 287–337; David Miller, *Principles of Social Justice*, Revised edition (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 1999); Taylor et al., *Multiculturalism*.

⁸⁹ Michael Walzer, *Spheres Of Justice* (Basic Books, 1983), xiii.

⁹⁰ Axel Honneth, "Recognition and Justice: Outline of a Plural Theory of Justice," *Acta Sociologica* 47, no. 4 (2004): 351.

⁹¹ Elizabeth Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, Reprint edition (Princeton Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁹² Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Testimonial injustice arises when a listener unfairly diminishes the credibility of a speaker's assertions due to biases or stereotypes.⁹³ This process is often enabled by stigmatization—the perpetuation of preconceived notions and biases about the abilities and legitimacy of different social groups. For example, individuals from racial minorities or women may be unjustly deemed untrustworthy or incompetent, leading their contributions to be undervalued or dismissed in discussions on topics where their insights could be significant. Hermeneutical injustice, another dimension of epistemic injustice, occurs when the absence of adequate language or conceptual frameworks impedes individuals from articulating their experiences of injustice.⁹⁴ This form of injustice typically stems from the historical marginalization of specific groups, which restricts the development of collective hermeneutic resources needed to understand and communicate their perspectives.

To address these forms of injustice, it is crucial to engage in intentional efforts to counteract the biases and structural inequalities that underpin them. For instance, mitigating testimonial injustice involves cultivating an awareness of unconscious biases and striving to assess the credibility of speakers more charitably. This intentionality helps to correct for the undue influence of prejudice on judgment.

Similarly, addressing hermeneutical injustice requires the development of what Fricker describes as hermeneutical virtue. This involves a reflexive critical sensitivity to instances where a speaker's reduced intelligibility stems from gaps in collective interpretive resources. In Fricker's words, the virtuous hearer demonstrates "reflexive awareness of how the relation between his social identity and that of the speaker is impacting on the intelligibility to him of what she is saying."⁹⁵ This practice fosters a more equitable and inclusive interpretive process, enabling marginalized voices to be understood and validated within broader societal dialogues.

To Conclude: Reframing Normative Objectives of Political Correctness

This article has argued that the normative goals of political correctness efforts promote the principle of equality. This emphasis enables us to identify individuals who prioritize equality as a rationale for limiting speech as those who could be considered as proponents of political correctness even though they do not explicitly state their advocacy. Although the article identified specific advocates and their references to equality, their writings did not elucidate the type of equality that should be comprehended concerning speech rules. At that point this work argued that such advocates actually lack in their terminology references to equal recognition and epistemic justice and that it may be helpful to reframe the normative background of political correctness in the light of these two concepts.

In the context of speech, equality claims can be interpreted as promoting "equality of opportunity" by striving to improve the chances for individuals to speak and be heard. This initiative may enhance opportunities for various individuals to articulate their views and be

⁹³ Fricker, 17.

⁹⁴ Fricker, 161.

⁹⁵ Fricker, 169.

acknowledged, while also guaranteeing that diverse perspectives are adequately represented in the ‘marketplace of ideas’. However, the particular assertion of equality that political correctness seeks to imply is not of this nature. Instead, it looks like, as argued in Friedman & Narveson “the fundamental aim (...) is *equality of outcome* and the politically correct principle is that everyone has the right to that status, a right overriding any considerations of merit deployed within the offending field.”⁹⁶

Equality, as a guiding element, operates by censoring or self-censoring specific types of speech deemed offensive to marginalized or oppressed groups. Political correctness aims to address the injustices faced by particular groups by eradicating offensive behaviors or language directed at them, emphasizing non-material forms of injustice and equality in terms of social status. This is predicated on the belief that granting unrestricted freedom of speech, particularly when it is derogatory towards marginalized and oppressed groups, would ultimately silence those people. Proponents consider the ‘silencing’ of these groups to be a manifestation of injustice. On the other hand, political correctness seeks to enhance and equalize the position of excluded and oppressed groups by prohibiting the use of inappropriate language that undermines their dignity in society. Injustices related to group traits are examined in the literature using the frameworks of recognition and epistemic injustices. To properly comprehend the normative attributes of political correctness, it is essential to create connections with relevant theories.

According to the concept of recognition, the failure to meet the expectations of proper recognition and respect is deemed a form of injustice. This is a substantial and persistent experience encountered by oppressed populations. Similarly, in the context of unequal power dynamics within a society, the concept of epistemic injustice highlights the perspectives of marginalized groups who are denied equivalent trust, accountability, and respect regarding their experiences. Honneth, a leading theorist of recognitional justice, argues that recognitional justice and epistemic justice are connected by their shared belief that individuals who are marginalized and disadvantaged in a society are often subjected to a form of unjust treatment characterized by condescension, disdain, and humiliation.⁹⁷ Political correctness may be viewed as a tactical tool employed by its proponents to confront and mitigate such injustices. The purpose is to mitigate potential harms arising from unrestrained freedom of speech, especially when such discourse targets underprivileged communities.

The literature on freedom of speech associates the harm related to the aforementioned injustices with the concept of dignity. Speech deemed detrimental to marginalized and oppressed groups is usually classified as hate speech, which is regarded as an affront to the dignity of individuals based on their identity. Political correctness, whilst matching the same problems as hate speech, tries to widen the scope of speech regulation in order to more completely address issues of recognition and epistemic inequities.

⁹⁶ Friedman and Narveson, *Political Correctness*, 52.

⁹⁷ Axel Honneth, “Two Interpretations of Social Disrespect A Comparison between Epistemic and Moral Recognition,” in *Epistemic Injustice and the Philosophy of Recognition*, ed. Paul Giladi and Nicola McMillan (New York: Routledge, 2022), 11, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429435133>.

Aimed at fostering equality, political correctness endeavors to expand the scope of speech deemed unacceptable by including any expression that suggests disparity among various groups or identities, as though all differences inherently signify unfairness in other domains. Advocates of political correctness contend that the appropriate use of language influences the transformation of power dynamics throughout society. For instance, in the pursuit of advancing gender equality across all societal dimensions, the utilization of politically correct terminology is essential. This entails refraining using language that emphasizes differences between men and women, as it may imply inequitable treatment of women. The offensiveness of speech, in terms of political correctness, may stem from its implication of inequality that can be construed as differential treatment.

In keeping with the aforementioned reasoning, politically incorrect speech serves as a vehicle for the failure of recognition and epistemic injustice. If a statement of difference inherently suggests inequality that would necessitate uneven treatment, then such discourse indicates that the equal status of its recipient has not been adequately recognized. Through many forms of politically incorrect discourse, the target of that speech may perceive a lack of respect for their dignity. They may be effectively marginalized and regarded as inferior due to the stereotypes and biases perpetuated by such politically incorrect discourse.

By the logic of the proponents of political correctness, such anticipated effects of politically incorrect speech justify its restriction. However, for the limitation claim to be plausible, it must be evaluated against persuasive arguments that underscore the significance of unrestricted free speech. Such plausibility could only come from the scrutiny of the values shape the norm of political correctness, and the principle of freedom of speech to clarify their interplay and tensions. Although political correctness appears to be influenced by the notions of recognition and epistemic injustice, the substantial literature advocating for freedom of speech predominantly emphasizes arguments related to truth, autonomy, democracy, and the acceptance of varied perspectives. This means that political correctness and traditional justifications of speech appeal to different values at first sight. This paper was an attempt to understand the normative attractiveness of political correctness better, so that future research on its tension with freedom of expression can benefit from it.

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