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SOME 'POLITICALLY INCORRECT' PATHWAYS THROUGH PC

According to one version, political correctness actually began as an in-joke on the left: radical students on American campuses acting out an ironic replay of the Bad Old Days BS (Before the Sixties) when every revolutionary groupuscule had a party line about everything. They would address some glaring example of sexist or racist behaviour by their fellow students in imitation of the tone of voice of the Red Guards or Cultural Revolution Commissar: 'Not very "politically correct", *Comrade!*' Marx (commenting on how the revolutionaries of one age frequently appeared in the disguise of those of a previous age) once famously remarked that 'History happens twice, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.' He forgot to add that, the third time, the joke would almost certainly turn round and bite you.

In fact, the first time I actually encountered the term 'political correctness' was when I was giving a talk at an American university in the mid-1980s. I was warned by the organisers of a conference that I should be careful about what I said because, in the new climate of the times following the Reagan election, the right had established campus committees to monitor speakers and take notes on everything said in lectures which could be interpreted as undermining the American Constitution or sapping the moral fibre of the nation's brightest and best. Here, PC was clearly part and parcel of the 1980s backlash against the 1960s. It was the right and the Moral Majority who were trying to prescribe what could and could not be thought and said in academic classrooms. The experience of the 'thought police' in operation at close quarters was sufficiently unpleasant for me to have, at best, highly ambiguous feelings when political correctness started to be implemented by what one may loosely call 'our side' in defence of what, in most cases, I take to be 'our issues'.

Some extremely odd reversals seemed to be going on here. Strategies associated with the radical right, the security state or the authoritarian left were being appropriated by the inheritors of the free-speech, libertarian radicalism of the 1960s. The only arguments against it seemed to belong to the most feeble of the classical liberal

cop-outs. Meanwhile, as a tactic, PC seemed to be empowering small groups of militants in the classrooms and in academic debate about curricula, etc, while leaving them increasingly isolated in the wider political arena. What seemed most characteristic of the PC issue was the way it cut across the traditional left/right divide, and divided some sections of the left from others. In all these ways, PC was and remains prototypical of the kinds of issues which have come to characterise the rapidly shifting political landscape of the 1990s, and thus to be symptomatic of certain broader historical trends. It therefore seems useful, even at this late stage, to place PC in a broader historical context before trying to chart a path through its contradictions.

First, there is the question of its 'Americanness'. My own view is that when people dismiss PC as 'really an American phenomenon', they are thinking about PC in too narrow a way, as well as hoping that labelling it will make it go away. I want to argue that, as a political strategy – even more, as a political *style* – PC was an active presence in British politics in the early 1980s, even though at the time it was known by a different name. What's more, its so-called 'Americanness' tells us something significant about how all post-industrial societies are changing and what is happening to the politics of liberal democratic countries everywhere.

PC seems to me to reflect the fragmentation of the political landscape into separate issues; and the break-up of social constituencies, or at least their refusal to cohere any longer within some broader collective identity or 'master category' like that of 'class' or 'labour'. In fact, PC seems to be typical of those societies where there has been an erosion of the mass party as a political form, a decline in active participation in mass political movements and a weakening in the influence and power of the 'old' social movements of the working class and industrial labour. It has taken hold in places where the political initiative has passed to the 'new social movements', which is of course the soil in which PC has been nurtured. It therefore reflects a seismic shift in the political topography.

In the old days, class and economic exploitation were what the left considered the 'principal contradiction' of social life. All the major social conflicts seemed to flow from and lead back to them. The era of PC is marked by the proliferation of the sites of social conflict to include conflicts around questions of race, gender, sexuality, the family, ethnicity and cultural difference, as well as issues around class and inequality. Issues like family life, marriage and sexual relations, or food, which used to be considered 'non-political', have become politicised. PC is also characteristic of the rise of 'identity politics', where shared social identity (as woman, Black, gay or lesbian), not material interest or collective disadvantage, is the mobilising factor. It reflects the spread of 'the political' from the public to the private arena, the sphere of informal social interaction and the scenarios of everyday life. The feminist slogan, 'The personal is political', captures these shifts perfectly.

On another dimension, PC is a product of what we might call 'the culturing of politics' – an approach which is based on the recognition that our relationship to 'reality' is always mediated in and through language and that language and discourse are central to the operations of power. It is politics 'after cultural studies', in the sense that it has absorbed many of the theoretical developments

in cultural theory and philosophy of recent decades. It may not know much economics, but it sure understands that things – including the movements of the economy – only make sense and become the objects of political struggle because of how they are represented. In other words, they have a cultural or discursive dimension. In this sense, we may say that PC arises in an intellectual culture which has undergone what the philosophers call 'the linguistic turn'.

Taken together, these things go some way to explaining the particular *style* of PC: its confrontational, in-your-face mode of address. It consciously intrudes a stance and tone of voice which seem more appropriate to public contestation into so-called 'private' space. Many have commented on the intellectualist or 'academic' nature of PC politics. I think they not only mean that PC often seems to be contained within academia. They are also referring to what some philosophers would call its extreme 'nominalism', that is to say, its apparent belief that if things are called by a different name they will cease to exist. It has a highly individualist notion of politics – politics as the lone, embattled individual 'witnessing to the Truth'. PC gives the impression of a small but dedicated band who are determined to stand up and be counted. That isn't the only sense in which PCers remind one of latter-day Puritans like the Saints of the seventeenth century. A strong strain of moral self-righteousness has often been PC's most characteristic 'voice'.

The rise of political correctness seems to be intimately connected with the fact that, in the US until recently and in the UK still, the 1980s and 1990s have been marked by the dominance of the political new right. The Reagan–Bush and Thatcher regimes commanded the political

stage. But they also set the parameters of political action and moral debate. They redefined the contours of public thinking with their virulently free-market social philosophy and set in motion a powerful, new, anti-welfare consensus. Their ascendancy was built not only on their command of the whole state apparatus of government but also on their mastery of the ideological terrain – their willingness to address ideological questions like morality, sexuality, parenting, education, authority in the classroom, traditional standards of learning, the organisation of knowledge in the curriculum – with the seriousness which they deserved. They successfully fashioned a seductive appeal to selfishness, greed and possessive individualism, striking a sort of populist alliance across the lines of traditional class alignments and introducing the gospel that 'market forces must prevail' into the very heart of the left's traditional support. They exploited ordinary people's basic fears of crime, race, 'otherness', of change itself. They fished in the murky waters of a narrow and reactionary cultural nationalism and rallied around their sexual and cultural agenda a highly vocal and well-organised 'silent' Moral Majority. Paradoxically, though PC is its sworn adversary, the New Right shares with PC an understanding that the political game is often won or lost on the terrain of these moral and cultural issues, apparently far removed from the Westminster (or for that matter, Labour's) conception of 'politics'.

In Britain, despite the cosmetic shift to the more acceptable face of 'Majorism', nothing has been able to derail the long-term, historic transformation of British society which Thatcherism initiated. It is important to distinguish here between an effective mastery of political power in government, of which we have seen many

examples, and the project of the New Right, which represents something deeper and more profound. We are talking about the use of political power in order to 'wind up' one whole historical era – the welfare-state, Keynesian, full-employment, comprehensive education-era on which the postwar settlement was constructed – and its replacement by another entirely new type of social order. Its outlook penetrated deep into social, moral, sexual and family life. It has more or less comprehensively transformed all our public institutions – forcing them, through the application of new principles of enterprise management, either to directly obey or indirectly to 'mimic' the market. It has a philosophy, a recipe for everything: for remodelling not only how we behave as citizens and voters, but as mothers, fathers, children, teachers, doctors and lovers.

This deep-seated, multifaceted, fundamental programme of 'reform' was put in motion by the conduct of a new kind of politics: a political struggle conducted on many different fronts at the same time, with an intellectual, a moral, a cultural and a philosophical cutting edge, as well as an economic strategy. Its success is to be judged not just by its capacity to win elections, albeit on a minority basis, but by its effectiveness in remaking public and civic life. Despite its commitment to 'roll back the state', its triumph lay in the management of society in its most minute detail – from whether the gift by private charities of hot soup to the homeless was likely to make them more 'dependent', to whether or not it is acceptably 'British' to cheer the West Indies cricket team when it is knocking the stuffing out of the English side at Lords. The conduct of politics on the basis of the mastery of a range of different struggles, the welding together of

different interests into a broad populist 'alliance' and the capacity not just to reflect a consensus but to 'win consent', to construct a majority out of a series of minorities, makes it appropriate to call the New Right's strategic conduct of politics 'hegemonic'.

That, precisely, has been the weakness of the traditional left, at least in the UK. Its response to this New Right offensive has been defensive, retreating to its well-defined, but increasingly obsolescent and declining sources of strength. It has failed to engage the new contradictions which the changes have produced, or to rethink its traditional values and commitments in the light of rapidly and permanently changing circumstances. Driven back all along the front, with its philosophy unhinged by wider historical shifts (like the break up of the so-called 'state socialist' experiments in Eastern Europe and the decline of welfare capitalism in the West), the opposition has not been able to stage, let alone win, any engagement of sufficient depth or historical significance to interrupt the right's project. Instead, it has been driven on to the defensive. In particular, it has failed to connect the older forces of reform with any of the newer forces – the new social movements – which we argued earlier are emerging in and characteristic of the more fragmented political landscape we now inhabit.

The GLC was one of the key examples of this in the UK, and is worth recalling here because it helps us to situate PC in the British context. The Ken Livingstone GLC was significant, not only because it represented almost the only serious political alternative to Thatcherism in the 1980s, but because of the new form of politics and political alliances through which it was constituted. In the reconstructed GLC, the 'new' social movements took

command within the institutions and in an (often difficult) alliance with the 'old' forces of London Labour and the older culture of Labourism. Following its example, a new kind of 'new left' emerged in several cities. Wherever it was able to win electoral power, it used its position and such funds as it had available (which, for peculiar historic reasons we won't go into, were substantial in the GLC case) to legislate into existence not only an expansion of local services to the poorer parts of the population, but a new kind of anti-sexist, anti-racist, anti-homophobic agenda. This was especially the case in education and in the adoption of equal opportunities and sexual harassment codes which it was able to push through in those areas which still remained under local authority control.

There was something quite novel about this political movement and formation: partly because of the different radical traditions and forces which it brought into alliance; partly because the claims of the new social movements had never before in the UK been within reach of actual policy implementation on this scale. It was also significant, in my view, because the issues were put together in such a way as to cut across the traditional class alignments and create a new kind of potentially popular social 'block'. To put it in terms of our earlier argument, the GLC/local socialism alliance began to look like the only 'hegemonic' political strategy on the left capable of matching, in depth, complexity and novelty, the radical thrust of Thatcherism's project at the national level.

The famous 'fare's fair' campaign on London Transport was paradigmatic. Here was an issue about prioritising public needs over private ones (taking head-on the key Thatcherite theme of privatisation), combined with a strong redistributive and egalitarian emphasis (those who

didn't have cars deserved to travel safely and conveniently as much as private car owners), which was linked to some key 'cultural' themes (the revival of urban life and space, environmental damage, the Londoners' pride in the city) and underpinned by an explicitly 'new social movement' theme (the guarantee of safe travel for women and the right of single women to move on their own through the city at their choice at any time of the day or night – the feminist slogan of 'reclaim the night').

It has always seemed to me that destruction of the GLC and the intensity of the assault on local government were motivated by the Thatcher government's desire to strangle in its bed what they unconsciously recognised as a potentially popular and effective new alliance of social forces. And so they did. This attack was spearheaded by the most virulent campaign by the Tory tabloid press about 'loony-left councils' and the proliferation of stories in the media about the banning of 'Baa, Baa, Black Sheep' in schools by over-energetic anti-racist teachers, etc. This vicious campaign was less easy to counter because, as always happens, there was just enough truth in the stories in a few instances to sustain the media amplification. As has become customary since, one found oneself then, as one finds oneself with PC now, fighting on several fronts at once: defending the importance of the issues raised; trying to unmask the politically motivated media hype; while at the same time distancing oneself from some of the undeniable idiocies committed in the name of 'anti-racism' or 'anti-sexism' or 'anti-homophobia' by the militants. Our enemies are bad enough; God save us from our friends.

The rights and wrongs of the GLC-loony-left affair are not worth arguing over, but the deeper political judgements are. What seemed to have happened in the after-

math of Thatcherism's success in rolling back this attempt to legislate the agendas of the new social movements into place was the isolation of these minorities as the political tide receded. The sense of isolation was compounded by a sort of desperate 'triumph of the will' – the determination to stand fast, hold out and press on, even when the wave of popular support which, at an earlier stage, had appeared to be moving its way, ebbed. Perhaps inevitably, what began in the early 1980s as a broad, national-popular strategy of a hegemonic kind – advancing on several fronts at once, combining power in office with an educative approach to politics outside, winning consent and enlarging its popular-democratic base as it went – reverted, in the late 1980s and 1990s, to an older form of politics – a sort of defensive vanguardism.

Now it may be argued that, in fact, a popular-democratic counter-politics to Thatcherism, based around the local socialism/new social movements alliance, was never on the cards. But even if this is true, the consequences of the new social movements, with their novel political agenda and their instinctive understanding of the new political world, reverting from a 'hegemonic' to a vanguardist style of political opposition, has to be reckoned with. It is not only possible but necessary, in my view, to be 'strategic', both when you are advancing and when you are retreating. And no one knows or illustrates that lesson better than the Thatcherite New Right, which has time and again since 1979 been forced back on a defensive holding operation for a time, only to come back fighting on another version of the same, deep strategic vision. When, for example, the NHS proved to be the nation's sticking point in Thatcherism's modernisation programme, Thatcherism did not give up its strategic objec-

tive. Instead it sent Mrs T out in front to declare 'It is safe in our hands' – and then set about dismantling its underlying principle by obliging it to submit to market forces, all the while insisting through the weasel words of ministers like Mrs Bottomley that nothing whatsoever had changed. That is what I call advancing strategically while retreating.

I believe, then, that, in the UK, the narrowness, moralism and entrenched vanguardism so characteristic of the recent style of much of PC in the public-political arena was bred in or reinforced by that moment of defeat in the mid-1980s; just as it has been underpinned, elsewhere, by an equivalent, though no doubt different, failure or weakness of the left in the face of the New Right. I would add that what is at issue here is not a tactical judgement about whether the new social movements performed well or badly in this or that particular instance, but a deeper question of how the left should think about political strategy. Can the historic agenda of the new right (which I happen to believe is not simply to stay in power for ever but to reconstruct the whole social and moral-political order irrevocably) be effectively opposed or defeated by a 'vanguardist' minority strategy? My answer to that (which at least has the virtue of consistency) is no. Not only because of the kind of assessment of the historic character of the new right I have tried to make elsewhere but because, as Antonio Gramsci, to whom we owe the concept of politics as a struggle for 'hegemony', once argued, in liberal-democratic societies like ours, politics have irrevocably shifted from what he called (using the military metaphors of the First World War) a 'war of manoeuvre' to a 'war of position'.

A 'war of manoeuvre' is one in which you try to overrun

the opposition forces by frontal assault. A 'war of position' is where you advance on a number of different positions at once, your overall strength residing not in the Walls of Jericho collapsing but in the overall 'balance of forces' across the whole terrain of struggle. The latter is appropriate to societies where power is no longer concentrated in one place or centre, like the Post Office or Government House, which at one time revolutionaries were anxious to seize, but has been dispersed or de-centred across society as a whole. It is also appropriate to a situation, such as is common to all post-industrial societies like ours, where power is exercised not only in the state but in what Gramsci called 'civil society' – yes, precisely through those sites like the culture, moral and social questions, the family, education, religion, gender, sexuality, race, national identity, the media, religion, which, we argued earlier, the new social movements and the 'culturing of politics' have brought into the centre of the political equation. Though effective defence is an essential part of modern political struggles, and winning power is an important element, they are no substitute for a strategic form of politics pursued as a 'war of position'.

Another key point in this 'war of position' kind of strategy is that it prioritises 'winning consent' – winning the majority over to your side – over simply 'winning battles'. It is conscious that, in the aftermath of liberal democracy, however limited those gains of universal suffrage, free speech, the rule of law, may now appear to be, the decisive engagements will be fought out over what we might call 'democratic' terrain. That is to say, anyone who is seriously in the business of the long-term transformation of society into something better has to come to terms with the awkward fact that we live after – i.e. 'post'

– the democratic revolution. The question of winning the majority cannot be sacrificed to our own purist sense of being 'correct' for that simply leads to being 'lefter than thou', to thinking that the minority knows best and will, if necessary, force the majority to be free.

That was the defence of the Leninist version of the 'war of manoeuvre'; and we can see in Eastern Europe today some of the consequences of its vanguardism (e.g. a revolutionary change which failed to win, educate and transform 'the majority', who simply bided their time, and have since reverted to many of the archaic, ethnocentric, racist and nationalistic attitudes they held before the Leninists seized power 'on their behalf'). A war of position cannot afford for a moment, in the name of some 'Higher Good' or some 'superior knowledge', to free itself of the harsh discipline of democracy. Unless it is coupled with a strategy which is democratic – in the sense that it genuinely addresses the real fears, confusions, the anxieties as well as the pleasures of ordinary people, tries to educate them to new conceptions of life, to win them over and thus to constitute majorities where there are now only fragmented minorities – it is destined to fail in the long run, whatever its little local successes. The result of pushing *Jenny Lives with Eric and Martin* for distribution in local schools through an education committee on a narrow majority without the hard graft of winning parents to a less homophobic view of sexuality, may only be to make the backlash, when it comes, that bit more extreme, even though at the time the victory over the bigots may make the saving remnant feel good. This is a hard truth which, paradoxically, it seems to me the forces of PC in its post-GLC manifestation and the traditional Labour Party, in their different ways, have signally failed to grasp.

The principal deduction I make, then, from the attempt to place PC in some kind of longer political and historical perspective, is that it is a vanguardist tactic pursued as if it could yield strategic political results. Correct in taking these wider cultural and social issues on board, it has no proper understanding of the centrality of an 'educative' conception of politics, and of the winning of consent to the effective pursuit of the 'culture wars'. It has radicalised the political agenda, but it is stuck in an old and discredited conception of 'the political'.

The political assessment is, however, only the start of the story. We need to go on to question some of PC's fundamental, underlying assumptions, especially as these appear in its post-GLC, post-mid-1980s manifestation. Such an assessment is not easy to make, and although my overall judgement is negative there are some anti-PC arguments which seem to me invalid, requiring a more balanced and nuanced account of its strengths and weaknesses. For example, the old left critique – that PC concerns itself with irrelevant and trivial issues as compared with the 'real' questions of poverty, unemployment and economic disadvantage which it ought to be addressing – is patently unacceptable. It is the product of an archaic view, a sort of crass, low-flying materialism, that 'class' is both more real and more simple to address than, say, gender; that 'class', because it is linked to the economic, is somehow more materially determining, and that the economic factors work as it were on their own, outside of their social and ideological, their gendered and 'raced' conditions of existence. This seems to me absolutely wrong; and clinging to it is representative of the way in which, despite everything that has happened in the last three decades to disturb or challenge its assumptions, a

traditionalist conception of 'left politics' remains rock solid and deeply embedded in the collective consciousness (even, surprisingly, among some committed feminists!).

PCers are surely correct in foregrounding the neglected questions of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, language, knowledge, the curriculum, the ethnocentricity of the canon and so on. If so, then they are also correct in trying to make them the objects of political struggle. They are also surely correct in saying that the reason why 'politics' has traditionally neglected these questions is not through some conscious, rational choice or conspiracy to do so but because the whole culture works so as to render these social antagonisms politically invisible. That being the case, it will – as PC rightly argues – take a good deal of stomping around, the tumbling of sacred taboos, the breaking of collusive silences, even to render these issues visible – let alone think up institutional strategies, which might address them effectively. What's more, if policy and institutional changes are made which don't penetrate to the level of personal practice in everyday life, the changes won't in the end matter. We all know right-on anti-sexist men who are so busy passing equal opportunities resolutions through their workplaces they just can't spare a moment to do the washing up.

On the other hand, PC should know that challenging the assumptions built into our ordinary use of language is one thing, policing language is another. Trying to get people collectively to change their behaviour towards minorities is one thing and telling them what they can and can't do is something altogether different. It knows, or should know that if the way we practise politics doesn't succeed in 'winning identification' it cannot produce the new political subjects who must actually sustain the

practice, no matter how 'objectively' correct the analysis. What we call identities are not created outside of culture and then mobilised by politics. Instead, politics consists fundamentally of the process of forming individuals (whose identities are multiple and divided) into 'new political subjects' (i.e. making people with a whole range of skin colours feel and act 'Black' politically; making a variety of different women 'feminist' in their thinking) and winning their identification (which will never be total or homogeneous) to certain political positions. A strategy designed to silence problems without bringing them out and dealing with them is dealing with difficult issues at the level of symptom rather than cause.

The problem with PC, then, in my view, does not lie with its agenda, with which I sometimes agree, but with its failure to grasp the implications of the positions which it appears to hold. Anyone who understands the importance of language knows that meaning cannot be finally fixed because language is by its very nature multi-accentual, and meaning is always on the slide. It is the right which wishes to intervene ideologically in the infinite multi-accentuality of language and tries to fix it in relation to the world so that it can only mean one thing – roughly, whatever it is John Patten has decided in his infinite wisdom young people need to be taught in order to become proper little English men and women. However, the idea that, by a process of legislation the left can or should intervene to try to fix language is simply to play exactly the same game as John Patten, only upside down or back-to-front. But one of the major lessons we have learned since 'the linguistic turn' in philosophy and cultural theory is that you do not escape from the effects of a model or a practice simply by turning it on its head.

To believe that *all* Black people are good and clever may be a relief after centuries in which they have been thought to be nasty, brutish and dumb; but it is still predicated on racist assumptions. One needs to give up on trying to secure an anti-racist politics on biological or genetic grounds, whether the latter are working for us or for the National Front. The real break comes not from inverting the model but from breaking free of its limiting terms, changing the frame.

PC has changed what it wants the language and the culture to say and mean but it has not changed its conception of how meaning and the culture *work*. This is not only a question of language. The whole PC strategy depends on a conception of politics as the unmasking of false ideas and meanings and replacing them by true ones. It is erected in the image of 'politics as truth' – a substitution of the false racist or sexist or homophobic consciousness by a 'true consciousness'. It refuses to take on board the profound observation (for example, by Michel Foucault and others) that the 'truth' of knowledge is always contextual, always constructed within discourse, always connected with the relations of power which make it true – in short, a 'politics of truth'. The view that we need to struggle over language because discourse has effects for both how we perceive the world and our practice in it, which is right, is negated by the attempt to short-circuit the process of change by legislating some Absolute Truth into being. What's more, what is being legislated is another single, homogeneous truth – our truth to replace theirs – whereas the really difficult task now is to try to hold fast to some perspective of changing the world, making it a better place, while *accepting and negotiating difference*. The last thing we need is the model

of one authority substituting one set of identities or truths with another set of 'more correct' ones. The critique of cultural authority, of essentialism and of uniform and homogeneous conceptions of cultural identity have rendered this essentialist conception of politics null and void.

Political correctness, then, is a paradox – which no doubt explains why I feel so deeply ambivalent about it. In one sense, it seems to belong to and to share some of the characteristics of the new political moment. It even seems, at times, to embody some of its new conceptions. At the same time, a great deal of what actually passes for 'PC' in practice is a sort of deformation – a caricature – of a new form of politics. It has been produced by a new political conjuncture. But it does not seem to understand the forces and ideas which have actually produced it. Instead, it tries to conduct new struggles with ancient and decrepit weapons.

The sense we had that PC has divided the left against itself, is not, in the end, an illusion or a mistake because, indeed, there *is* a fundamental divide. This is the divide between, on the one hand, those who believe that politics consists of getting 'our side' where 'their side' used to be, and then exercising power in exactly the same way they did. This binary strategy of governing society by 'policing' it will be justified because it is our side which is doing it. On the other hand, there are those who believe the task of politics in a post-industrial society at a postmodern moment is to unsettle permanently all the configurations of power, preventing them – right or left – from ever settling again into that unconsciousness, the 'deep sleep of forgetfulness', which power so regularly induces and which seems to be a condition of its operation. Along this frontier, I'm afraid, PC falls irredeemably on what I consider to be the wrong side.

Not that I expect the politically correct to agree. Indeed, as I write, I can hear the thumbscrews being unpacked, the guillotine sharpened, the pages of the Dictionary of Political Correctness being shuffled, the tumbrils beginning to roll . . .