Linguæ &

Rivista di lingue e culture moderne

1
2021

The Adult Reader of Children's Literature
edited by Jan Marten Ivo Klaver

The Work of Art
in the Age of Political Correctness

Emilija Dimitrijevic   emilija.m.dimitrijevic@gmail.com

Meredith College, Sansepolcro

ABSTRACT – This article sets to examine some of the impacts the notion of "political correctness" has on the art world today. It argues that what started as the noble attempts to compensate for the grievous history of racism by way of inclusive speech and affirmative action has, in the end, generated new forms of discrimination and closure. In this context, instead of pushing the boundaries of what is considered acceptable in social, moral or aesthetic terms, art is itself being pushed back within these boundaries and rendered inert and ingratiating.

KEYWORDS – political correctness; art; aesthetics; high education.

According to the OED, the history of the term "politically correct" begins in the 18th century, when it appeared in a U.S. Supreme Court decision about the boundaries of federal jurisdiction. In the first half of the 20th century, the phrase was used to denote, sometimes ironically, strict adherence to the ideology of the Communist Party. Due to this association, it reemerged in the late 1980s and the early 1990s in the United States as a part of smear campaign against radical policies and ideas associated with un-American and totalitarian values (Bloom 1987; D'Souza 1992; Sykes 1992). Actually, the new ideas and agendas regarding inclusive speech and multiculturalism emanated from the 1950s and '60s struggles to extend civil liberties and democratic rights to marginalised groups – presenting them as deriving from other contexts made it possible for conservative commentators to castigate forms of affirmative action without running the risk of appearing to attack the civil rights movements (Lea 2008, 113).

Then, starting from the 1990s, the notion of political correctness started to be criticised by the left-wing authors as well not because it was excessively radical but because it was not sufficiently so (Gitlin 1995; Scatamburlo 1998). Political correctness was dubbed "Marxism without the economics, a revo-

lution made with words instead of weapons […] a new attempt to change society by changing the way people talk and think" (Bygrave 1991, 14). A new attempt to sever "the signs of culture […] from the conditions of their production", which eventually leaves us "with an empty politics, a series of metaphorical gestures which, in the end, have little impact on actual existing relations of power and privilege, either inside or outside of the academy" (Scatamburlo 1998, 174-75). Ironically, political correctness, in this view, becomes an end in itself and language, rather than being the vehicle of social change, becomes a substitute for it.

Truth to tell, some changes regarding the way in which Americans talk to and treat one another were necessary and long overdue. As Rorty pointed out in *Achieving Our Country,* prior to 1960s casual discrimination against the traditionally oppressed groups was tolerated on the left as well as on the right. It was only after the 1960s that leftist scholarship exerted significant effort to make such forms of discrimination no longer acceptable. The teaching of books such as *The Beloved* or *To Kill a Mocking Bird*, to mention just a few, has taught new generations of students to think critically about discrimination and has made America "a far more civilised society" than it was before the 1960s (Rorty 1998, 81). At the same time, the success the left achieved remained largely confined to the sphere of culture. By contrast to the pre-sixties reformist left, the academic left was far more concerned with "naming the system" than with changing it through social reforms. As Rorty explains,

> "The system" is sometimes identified as "late capitalism," but the cultural Left does not think much about what the alternatives to a market economy might be, or about how to combine political freedom with centralised economic decision making. Nor does it spend much time asking whether Americans are under-taxed, or how much of a welfare state the country can afford, or whether the United States should back out of the North American Free Trade Agreement. When the Right proclaims that socialism has failed, and that capitalism is the only alternative, the cultural Left has little to say in reply. For it prefers not to talk about money. Its principal enemy is a mind-set rather than a set of economic arrangements – a way of thinking which is, supposedly, at the root of both self-ishness and sadism. (Rorty 1998, 78-79)

All this considering, it does not perhaps come as a surprise that while the culture of political correctness has flourished, "economic inequality and economic insecurity have steadily increased" (*ibid.*, 83). Those who, as we have seen before, criticise political correctness as not sufficiently radical do so on

exactly such grounds. They argue that, as the attention towards the normative use of language has increased, the attention towards social reforms has diminished. This is also visible in the way in which the term seems to refer more to what needs to be said rather than to what needs to be done: "Criticising someone for referring to an administrative assistant as a 'secretary' is a manifestation of political correctness, but advocating for higher wages for assistants is not; insisting on trigger-warnings on syllabi or deleting offending material is again a form of political correctness, but arguing for rape-prevention security measures is not" (Moller 2019).

It is worthwhile to look at some examples of how normative discourse has gained momentum while leaving behind people's substantive needs. For instance, one of the key terms of political correctness today is "microaggression". Harvard University psychiatrist Chester Pierce was the first to adopt it in 1970 to refer to apparently minor but nonetheless damaging behaviour directed towards African Americans (Pierce 1970). However, it was not until 2007 that the notion of microaggression received major attention. While acknowledging important strides made since the era of the civil rights movement, the seminal article "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice" contended that racial inequities remain the legacy of American society, though in new and more insidious ways. The authors defined racial microaggressions as "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward people of colour" (Sue *et al.* 2007, 271). For instance, if a woman clutches her bag when a person of colour walks past, this can be seen as a microaggression because such behaviour apparently sends the message that people of colour are criminals. Microaggressions were further subdivided into microassaults, microinsults and microinvalidations. While microassaults are anonymous racial derogations, microinsults are put-downs that "convey rudeness and insensitivity and demean a person's racial heritage or identity", and microinvalidations are those forms of microaggressions that "exclude, negate, or nullify the psychological thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of colour" (*ibid.*, 274). Thus, apparently innocuous questions such as "Where are you from?" or "Where were you born?" have been classified as microaggressions because they seem to treat Asian Americans or Latino Americans as foreigners in their own country (Sue 2010, 33). Likewise, "Wow! How did you become so good in math?" counts as a microaggression because it ascribes intelligence based upon one's race just as

"I believe the most qualified person should get the job" is a microaggression because it purportedly downplays the role of race in achieving success in life (*ibid.*, 33-34).

The undoubtable merits of the original research are that it has heightened attention to racial slights and showed that they correlate to symptoms of anxiety and depression. There is also no doubt either that it has had a major impact on articulating new concerns about new forms of discrimination. Since 2007 more than 3000 scholarly articles containing the term "microaggression" were published, of which more than 2000 were published since 2012 (Lillenfield 2017, 139). Gradually, the term microaggression started to be used not only in the context of covert racial discrimination, but also with reference to other groups who have traditionally been the object of discrimination, including women, LGBTQ+ people and other ethnicities. By the end of 2015, "microaggression" was not only acknowledged as embedded in common usage but it also topped the list of the Words of the Year, according to *Global Language Monitor*.

The concern with microaggressions did not remain limited to psychology research programmes. Since 2014, when the University of California hosted the forum "Microaggression in the classroom", many other universities and colleges organised workshops and conferences to train faculty members and students on how to detect and address the problem of microaggressions in their environment. Students themselves became more vigilant about implicitly prejudicial or aggressive behaviour. Pembroke students in the UK and Oberline College students in the USA, for instance, denounced as "cultural appropriation" non-authentic Tunisian rice and sushi served at their restaurants. Hampshire College cancelled the invitation of an Afrobeat band to the Halloween party over the concerns that the band is "too white", and Yale students proposed a set of guidelines on costumes to avoid at Halloween. Much the same spirit led Emory students to protest against a lack of safety and to organise "emergency counselling" on the day they discovered "Trump 2016" chalked all over their campus. That afternoon, a group of 40 to 50 students shouted in the quad, "You are not listening! Come speak to us, we are in pain!".

Yet, as has been pointed out, the original research on microaggressions stands in need of further corroboration both conceptually and methodologically (Lilienfeld 2017). There is still a prominent lack of clarity and consensus about what constitutes microaggressions. For instance, since the term microaggressions is used to define unintentional and unconscious acts,

this is at odds with the standard definition of aggression which involves the intention to harm the victim. As regards the methods, it has been noted that research was limited to self-reports of microaggression and that it needs to be supported by other systematic data typically used in psychology to constitute adequate scientific evidence. Notwithstanding these limitations, the original research article from 2007 "has been used as a template in virtually all research articles in the MRP literature", while the taxonomy of microaggressions "continues to be distributed in verbatim form by numerous colleges and universities… for the purpose of microaggression training" (Lilienfeld 2017, 149). It comes as no surprise, then, that while raising awareness about subtle forms of discriminatory behaviour, institutional efforts to carry on microaggression research and training have backfired by lowering the bar of what is considered offensive.

So, where is the bar set now? Largely in the field of the personal, according to some commentators. In the article "The Coddling of the American Mind" which was published in 2015 in *The Atlantic* and went viral, the authors contended that a culture of protectiveness is arising at universities and colleges (Lukianoff and Haidt 2015). As the text explains, the problem here is not that students demand to be protected from offensive behaviour, but that everybody is now defining for oneself what constitutes an offence starting with how one feels about something. What is more, it more often than not generates a request for a retaliatory action. This constitutes what has been called the attitude of "vindictive protectiveness", in which "a claim that someone's words are 'offensive' is not just an expression of one's subjective feeling of offendedness" but is at the same time "a public charge that the speaker has done something objectively wrong. It is a demand that the speaker apologise or be punished by some authority for committing an offence" (*ibid.*).

This kind of demand for protection is not an entirely new phenomenon. In the 1990s, it was argued that education was taking a "therapeutic turn", in which attention was paid more to students' well-being and self-esteem than to scholarship as such (Sykes 1992; Hughes 1993). Some commentators saw this as a part of broader social trends in the United States, where the victim's status started to be claimed not only by minority groups but also by Ivy League students and millionaire artists. While it is true that many texts which criticised the victimist attitude selected the most absurd cases to lampoon while downplaying the real problems of poverty and unemployment, they have nevertheless contributed to delineate some broader contours of the phenomenon. If "Increasingly, Americans act as if they had received a life-

long indemnification from misfortune and a contractual release from personal responsibility", this can be seen, on the one hand, in relation to the complex judiciary system which permits lawyers to hold accountable any person or institution for failing to exercise adequate care and caution towards their clients, employees, and so on (Sykes 1992, 15). On the other hand, it also needs to be seen in relation to the rapidly growing therapeutic industry. Since the 1950s, the ways in which mental disorders are diagnosed and treated have been both redefined and have undergone intense commercialisation. From antidepressants to psychotherapy, group therapy and e-therapy, Americans have been offered multiple methods to deal with an increasing number of mental health issues, often seen as symptomatic of larger social malaise. Taken together, these factors help to explain why the notion of indemnification has become so widespread in the United States.

Of course, the art world and discourses on art have not remained exempt from new concerns regarding protection and redress. In 2014, for instance, the West Australia Opera removed *Carmen* from its repertoire because the opera is set in around a cigarette factory and features smoking. "We care about the health and wellbeing of our staff, stage performers and all the opera lovers throughout WA", said the opera's general manager, "which means promoting health messages and not portraying any activities that could be seen to promote unhealthy behaviour" (Tran 2014). Furthermore, 2015 saw Mount Hoyloke College, an all-women's school in Massachusetts, cancel the annual production of the play *Vagina's Monologues* over the concerns that it might cause offence to women without vaginas. In the same vein, "in our humanities departments… all artworks have become the subject of systematic interrogation either for sins of commission – often in terms of their embodiment of bad role models or stereotypes – or for sins of omission – often in terms of people and viewpoints that have been left out" (Carol 2001, 272). To meet the latest demands of political correctness, publishing houses attempted to cleanse of racial language masterpieces of literature such as *Huckleberry Finn*, *To Kill a Mocking Bird* and *Things Fall Apart*, and some schools banished *Brave New World* because of sexual content, while others, rather than subtracting, provided trigger-warnings on sensitive topics in *Mrs Dalloway* and *Antigone*.

Apparently, it is recurrently being assumed that the audience and readers are not able to see a work in its historical and social context. That its content is, in the first place, a source of contamination, not a platform for debate, and that not even the context of the classroom or a theatre provide the adequate framework for such a debate. Presumedly, this is done to protect

the audience from morally or socially corrosive material, but the point is that much as they may contain offensive, violent, distressing or embarrassing content, the presentation of problematic contents within a work of art does not necessarily imply an endorsement. Even though it contains violence, *Romeo and Juliet* is not promoting it, nor is *The Scarlet Letter* promoting adultery, nor is *Brave New World* advocating sex as entertainment. Instead, they do discuss them in the context of complex thematic relationships and in the context of the work's own time.

This is something we need to remember also when artworks are criticised on the ground of their authors' morality, a second major cause for disparaging a work of art. Quite often, criticism of the work of art has as its starting and ending point the author's private life: if it has been overshadowed by scandals, the work is automatically considered offensive and inappropriate. And yet, the life of the artist and the work of the artist are not quite one and the same thing. As Huxley rightly pointed out, "Not that all virtuous men are good artists, nor all artists conventionally virtuous. Longfellow was a bad poet, while Beethoven's dealings with his publishers were frankly dishonourable" (Huxley 1925, 179). Fra Lippo Lippi, Bernini, Coleridge, Dickens, Wagner, Wilde and Pound, to name but few, are among those who may not have been role-models in daily life but from whom we can learn immensely about art.

Related to this is a further concern where it appears that it is not only the moral content of the work or the morality of the author that may cause offence today – critical evaluation itself can be seen as a form of discrimination. For instance, Huxley's comments in "The Best Picture in the World", which I have quoted above, may easily be read as "elitist", just like George Eliot's "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists", George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" or Jeanette Winterson's "Art Objects". As a result, healthy criticism and discussion of aesthetic merit are stifled.

This last point is closely related to the fact that today we are struggling not only with the question of what constitutes artistic merit but also with the question of what constitutes art. This is the state of affairs which Baudrillard poignantly describes as that in which modernity exploded upon us bringing about the liberation in every sphere of art production and discussion while getting rid of referential values. Thus, "We see Art proliferating wherever we turn; talk about Art is increasing even more rapidly. But the soul of Art – Art as adventure, Art with its power of illusion, its capacity for negating reality, for setting up an 'other scene' in opposition to reality… in this sense, Art is gone" (Baudrillard 1993, 14). In a way which echoes Adorno and Horkheimer,

Baudrillard sees the world of art as a latecomer to the world of industry in the sense that it follows the logic of production and overproduction at top speed. And with rapidity as the norm and the lack of referential points, it embarks on the aestheticization of banality, where "No matter how marginal, or banal, or even obscene it may be, everything is subject to aestheticization, culturalization, museumification" (*ibid.*, 16). But broadening the concept of art to include everything is the surest way to ruin the concept. When everything is art, nothing is art. Similarly, when anyone, simply because of technological possibilities, can be called a creator, then again there is no art. What defines a work of art as art are the complex relationships between the elements of the work as well as its relationship to other works of the same genre and to the real world. It is against those relationships that one has to test all the opinions to which one is entitled. If "everything is subjective" or "everyone is entitled to their opinion" means that one can think and say whatever one wants, that is certainly possible, though rather trivial. But if "entitled to an opinion" means getting engaged in a dialogue about art in terms of its formal properties, art history and society, then it means something different. Certainly, some of the confusion in this area derives from the fact that art is generally seen as something that one can enjoy and evaluate spontaneously. Or, for that matter, create spontaneously. But nothing is farther from truth. The widely held idea that art is an immediate, spontaneous overflow of personal experience and emotions into a work is misleading. As Nochlin describes,

> Art is almost never that, great art never is. The making of art involves a self-consistent language of form, more or less dependent upon, or free from, given temporally defined conventions, schemata, or systems of notation, which have to be learned or worked out, either through teaching, apprenticeship, or a long period of individual experimentation. The language of art is, more materially, embodied in paint and line on canvas or paper, in stone or clay or plastic or metal – it is neither a sob story nor a confidential whisper. (Nochlin 1988, 149)

Art, of course, involves experience but it also involves the medium and form. It requires technique to bring out what is not technique and the medium to substantiate it. To ignore that would be to mystify the very nature of art.

If the notion of political correctness today has come to imply that masterpieces of art should be ignored or revamped, that history itself should be passed over, that works of art should be evaluated not on the grounds of their artistic merits but on the grounds of the authors' morality, if it has come to imply that everything is art and that we are all artists, then art should certainly

not be politically correct. Because if it is politically correct in that sense, it becomes no more than a comfort zone. And great art has never been a comfort zone, on the contrary. It has tackled social issues, challenged morals and revised aesthetic norms. It has never been politically correct but politically disruptive. Its "political potential", as Marcuse knew and said, lies precisely in its ability to generate an aesthetic reality "which explode[s] the given reality in the name of a truth normally denied or even unheard" and which leads to "the emergence of another reason, another sensibility, which defy the rationality and sensibility incorporated in the dominant social institutions" (Marcuse 1978, 7). Its purpose is not to be accommodating or ingratiating – it advances by pushing the boundaries of what is considered acceptable, not by pre-empting its own discourse.

For all these reasons, when I was writing this essay I was looking forward to David Mamet's new play about Harvey Weinstein. When interviewed by the *Economist* in 2018, the author of *Oleanna* said that he was following with interest the Me Too Movement when the Weinstein scandal happened and used it as inspiration for his new play. When asked if it was not "a bit tasteless to base a work of fiction on [Weinstein]", he replied by asking: "Have you read the play?". Where else to look for the merits and demerits of the play? Let's not forget that, as Robert Hughes once said, "an artist's merits are not a function of his or her gender, ideology, sexual preference, skin colour or medical condition, and to address an issues is not to address a public… the fact that a work of art is about AIDS or bigotry no more endows it with artistic merit than the fact that it's about mermaids and palm trees" (Hughes 1993, 185). Likewise, the fact that Mamet's play is about Weinstein by no means discredits it as a play. As a matter of fact, it will be interesting to see how an author who already in 1992 tackled the question of political correctness in an insightful and provocative way deals with the Weinstein scandal and the Me Too Movement. In the age of growing assertions about what is or is not politically correct, it may challenge us to look at both art and political correctness from more surprising perspectives.

References

Baudrillard, Jean. 1993. *Transparency of Evil*. London: Verso.

Bloom, Allan. 1987. *The Closing of the American Mind*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Bygrave, Mike.1991. "Mind Your Language". *The Weekend Guardian* 11 May: 14-15.

Carroll, Noel. 2001. *Beyond Aesthetics: Philosophical Essays*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

D'Souza, Dinesh. 1992. *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus*. New York: Vintage Books.

Gitlin, Todd. 1995. *The Twilight of Common Dreams*. New York: Metropolitan Books.

Haidt, Jonathan, and G. Lukianoff. 2015. "The Coddling of the American Mind". *The Atlantic* Sept. https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2015/09/the-coddling-of-the-american-mind/399356/ (18/03/2018).

Hughes, Robert. 1993. *Culture of Complaint: The Fraying of America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Huxley, Aldous. 1925. *Along the Road. Notes & Essays of a Tourist*. London: Chatto and Windus.

Lea, John. 2008. *Political Correctness and Higher Education: British and American Perspectives*. London: Routledge.

Lilienfeld, S. O. 2017. "Microaggressions: Strong Claims, Inadequate Evidence". *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 12 (1): 138-69.

Marcuse, Herbert. 1978. *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Microaggression is the Top Word of the Year for Global English. 2015. https://www.languagemonitor.com/top-words-of-the-year/microaggression-is-the-top-word-of-the-year-for-global-english-2015/ (15/05/2018).

Nochlin, Linda. 1988. "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?". In *Art and Sexual Politics*. Ed. by E. Baker and T. Hess, 145-78. New York: Macmillan. Reprinted in *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988.

Pierce, C. M. 1970. "Black Psychiatry One Year after Miami". *Journal of the National Medical Association* 62: 471-73.

Rorty, Richard. 1998. *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Scatamburlo, V. L. 1998. *Soldiers of Misfortune: The New Right's Culture War and the Politics of Political Correctness*. New York: Peter Lang.

Sue, Derald Wing. 2010. *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*. Hoboken, NY: John Wiley & Sons.

Sue, Derald Wing, C. M. Capodilupo, G. C. Torino, J. M. Bucceri, A. Holder, K. L. Nadal, and M. Esquilin. 2007. "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Implications for Clinical Practice". *American Psychologist* 62: 271-86.

Sykes, Charles J. 1992. *A Nation of Victims*. New York: St. Martin's Press.

Tran, Mark. 2014. "Australian Opera Company Drops Carmen over Smoking Scenes". *The Guardian* 9 Oct. https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2014/oct/09/australia-opera-drops-carmen-smoking-scenes (02/10/2018).