

## Debate

Martina Thiele

# Political correctness and Cancel Culture – a question of power!

The case for a new perspective

**Abstract:** The author makes a case for a new perspective in the journalistic debate about political correctness and Cancel Culture. Instead of discussing specific terms and language or freedom of expression and censorship in general, we should focus on privilege and power in order to determine who exerts power over our social discourse from which position as well as to expose inconsistencies. For it is mostly those who wield journalistic power who claim to be threatened by speech bans and censorship.

Hamburg-based publicist Erich Lüth (1902-1989) rose to nationwide fame when he called for a boycott in 1950. He reminded the public of filmmaker Veit Harlan's role in National Socialism, calling attention to the fact that Harlan, a Nazi protégé who had directed the anti-Semitic hate film *Jud Süß* (1940), could continue to make films in the newly founded Federal Republic unchallenged. Lüth called on the public to skip Harlan's new film *Immortal Lover* (1951). Harlan's film production company sued for an injunction to stop Lüth from making such statements. The case went all the way to the Federal Constitutional Court, which, in its *Lüth ruling* (1958) dismissed the lawsuit, referencing article 5 of the German constitution and its guarantee of freedom of opinion. An early case of Cancel Culture?

Just as the term political correctness, which has been defining our discourse on the boundaries of free expression since the 1990s, Cancel Culture also came to us from across the Atlantic. In Germany and the US, publicists are, once again, warning of the dangers of political correctness and Cancel Culture to ›society‹, ›truth‹, ›freedom of opinion‹, ›journalism‹, and even ›Western civilisation‹. So it's about the really big issues. It is also about language, about individual terms that are no longer allowed, and ugly characters that allegedly disfigure beauti-

ful texts, but must be used to signal inclusive language. Opponents of political correctness cite examples that seem inappropriate to them and offend their sense of language, from ›incorrectly gendered‹ words and gender-neutral participial constructions all the way to the ›N-word‹, which they say should retain its place in the classics of children’s literature.

This is what these publicists are really saying, more or less directly: 1. The way ›others‹ speak and write is wrong. 2. It bothers me. 3. Everything used to be better. 4. I’ve always done it this way. 5. I’m certainly not going to change anything. 6. If I get criticized for that, I’m a victim of censorship.

Opponents of PC will then, to use a military metaphor, bring out the big guns to buttress their personal unease, which they portray as being a *majority* sentiment: There is talk of totalitarianism, manipulation, an Orwellian thought and language police, and even comparisons with the Stasi and the Nazis. In the summer of 2020, an open *Letter on Justice and Open Debate* was published in the US by *Harper’s Magazine*, endorsed by about 150 signatories from the arts and culture, calling for ›more liberalism‹ and less ›censorship‹ (cf. Schwarz 2020). In Germany, the debate on political correctness and Cancel Culture was fueled by cancelled stand-up comedy performances (cf. Agar 2020; Cammann 2020; Nida-Rümelin 2020; Passmann 2020; Seeßlen 2020). In both countries, this discourse was intertwined with the debate on pandemic restrictions.

Much has been written on the strategies and argumentation patterns of PC critics as well as on hate speech, and counter speech (cf. Butler 2006; Eickelmann 2017; Sponholz 2017). There is an equal abundance of academic literature on why the so-called ›generic masculine‹ is exclusive and the case for inclusive, non-discriminatory language (cf. Günthner 2019; Heise 2000; Pusch 1984; Reiss 2010; Thiele 2020; Trömel-Plötz 2010). The authors point out the connection between language and thought, the fact that language is dynamic rather than static, and that therefore certain statements, terms, and phrases that may have been common in the past are now problematic in democratic societies. In some cases, they even constitute a felony, such as racist insults or Holocaust denial. Linguist and blogger Anatol Stefanowitsch believes that while efforts to use ›politically correct‹ language are necessary, they alone won’t create a just world. »But by employing such efforts, we show that a fair world is something we aspire to in the first place.« (Stefanowitsch 2018; cover blurb).

## Privilege and power

I am not here to argue about specific terms, discuss phrases in the press code, or make the case for inclusive language for the umpteenth time. Rather, I would like to address privilege and power, because that’s what social discourse

is all about. Like political scientist Karsten Schubert (2020), I propose that we approach the debate on political correctness from a new angle, focusing on who feels threatened in their freedom of expression and who is feeding the pet peeve of political correctness – be it consciously or unconsciously.

In a letter to the editor of *Der Spiegel*, Hamburg-based publicist Paul Sethe wrote in 1965: »Freedom of the press is the freedom of two hundred rich people to propagate their opinions. Free is he who is rich.« (Sethe 1965, quoted by von Hase 1966). Sethe was concerned with the power of newspaper publishers and internal freedom of the press. This quote dates back several decades, and yet, the unequal distribution of the power to speak, write, be heard, be seen, and be published remains fundamentally unchanged. Class and wealth, formal education and gender, ethnicity, and age are decisive factors that govern access to the media and the public sphere. Some enjoy a distinct advantage. Although half of Germany's population is female and a quarter of us are of migrant heritage, this real-life diversity is not reflected in publishing houses, agencies, and editorial offices. At the C-level, it is predominantly older men who call the shots. Media content analyses and representation studies show that despite all efforts to represent diversity, media tend to always turn to the same experts for commentary (cf. Prommer/Linke 2019).

Specifically, voices who decry political correctness have a far stronger media presence than they would have us believe. They have homepages and write blogs such as *politicallyincorrect* or *achgut*, a pun on the now derogatory German term Gutmensch, or ›do-gooder‹; they are on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, their articles appear in newspapers and magazines, ranging from fringe publications such as *Junge Freiheit* to big papers such as *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Die Welt* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. Their publications make the bestseller lists and they get invited to high-profile talk shows such as *Hart aber fair* or the *Anne Will show*. Dieter Nuhr continues to perform as a stand-up comedian, Thilo Sarrazin continues to sell books.

Nevertheless, detractors of political correctness feel disadvantaged and claim that we live under a persistent cultural hegemony of ›the 68ers‹ and new ›left-alternative‹ groups and ›do-gooders‹ such as the Fridays for Future movement. They overestimate the extent to which formerly unheard, marginalized groups are raising their voices. They feel threatened and cornered, or at least, like to cast themselves as victims of a ›left-wing opinion machine‹.

## Digital and social change

Changes in society and media have indeed caused slight shifts. Formerly excluded people with little media presence now have their own means and spaces of

communication. These young voices no longer depend on benevolent mentors, language gurus, and magnates who self-pityingly label themselves as ›old, white men‹. Young people, women, migrants, and the well-educated are no longer waiting to be invited to publish in this quality paper or to sit on that talk show host’s couch, doing the bidding of mainstream society. They create their own public spheres; they use the language they see fit, and they care little about the swelling song of the he-goat<sup>[1]</sup> of the established elites as they take their desperate last fight<sup>[2]</sup>.

In a debate about everyday racism, identity politics, and speech bans with Canan Topçu, moderated by Karen Krüger, Krsto Lazarevic describes this changed situation as follows:

»[...] what’s real, though, is a mostly white, male ethnic-German fear of losing the interpretative sovereignty they have held for decades. They behave like little children who had their toys taken away. They are used to their perspective being the only one. But now, a generation of migrants is willing and able to voice demands towards the *majority* of our society. This is actually proof that we are doing quite well, because in the past, migrant voices were not taken seriously at all and hardly ever heard. Many conservatives and right-wingers now act as if their contributions to our social debate were too loud or outrageous. What really bothers them, though, is the fact that today, there are different views from the ones that used to prevail. Guest workers were not brought here to be equal citizens, but to do the jobs that Germans didn’t want to do. The mindset that resulted from this attitude is still very common. Today, when children of these guest workers protest, dissent, and demand equal rights and opportunities, rather than just being subservient – a lot of people can’t handle it. So they rant about speech bans and cancel culture.« (Lazarevic, quoted by Krüger 2020)

## Cancel Culture and liberalism

Cancel Culture is not a new phenomenon. Time and again, various parties have made demands that something *not* be shown, *not* be said, *not* be exhibited publicly, as in the case Lüth vs. Harlan, which I mentioned earlier. But Cancel Culture as a new battle cry of PC critics is more than that: It serves as a smoke

- 1 »Song of the he-goat« is a literal translation of the Greek word »tragedy« and a reference to the title of a highly controversial essay by Botho Strauß, published in the news magazine *Der Spiegel* in 1993, which was interpreted as a manifesto of a right-wing conservative revolution.
- 2 A reference to the left-wing anthem »The Internationale« and its first chorus: »Nations hear the signal! On to the last fight! The Internationale fights for human right!«

screen for the enduring privilege of the powerful to decide where publicity, art, culture, assembly, and free speech are possible. Although national and international laws guarantee freedom of information, of opinion, and of the media; and even though access to the public seems to have been democratized, especially by ›social‹ media, the power and ownership structures in digital capitalism have actually changed very little.

Above all, the liberal faction within this anti-PC coalition, in its concern for ›freedom of opinion‹ and ›journalism‹, is clinging to the idea of the ›marketplace of ideas‹ and a free, equal exchange of all opinions. However, they ignore the fact that while in theory and legally speaking, everyone has access to the forums where opinions are exchanged and decisions prepared, a large part of the population remains excluded from them for economic and social reasons. It is taken for granted that the media market is highly concentrated, and that media are predominantly owned by a handful of private companies that can either grant or withhold public attention.

People accept this circumstance as long as they can be sure their voices are heard. Lisa Eckhart and J.K. Rowling, Francis Fukuyama and Josef Joffe, Harald Martenstein and Monika Maron have their audiences and enjoy wide media attention. They have to live with the fact that they are sometimes also criticized and their positions challenged – just like those ›do-gooders‹ and the ›politically correct‹. The disturbing aspect is that the PC detractors' freedom of expression is becoming increasingly synonymous with the freedom to spew right-wing, exclusionist ideas. The narrative of the spiral of silence, of being hushed lest one be accused of racism, anti-Semitism, and sexism has become pervasive, even in media that consider themselves liberal.

## Tolerate intolerance?

The debate about freedom and its boundaries is part of our democracy. Every day, we negotiate what can be done and said, what is discriminatory, and what is not. The purpose of laws and ethical consensus is to provide us guidance, but at the same time, they are not static or carved in stone. Just like language, they are subject to social change. What used to be customary, commonplace, and stated with impunity decades ago is now ostracized and sanctioned by law. Things that used to be subject to severe punishment decades ago no longer constitute a felony today.

What does freedom of the media mean, specifically? Who can grant publicity, who can generate it, who can use it for their interests? These are always also questions of perspective and of power and privilege, as I have tried to point out in this

article. In our social debate on political correctness and Cancel Culture, we must always try to discern who actually suffers exclusion and intolerance, who is able to fight back, and who is denied democratic participation in the first place. We might enrich our debate by re-reading texts such as Herbert Marcuse's »Repressive Tolerance« (1966), as well as by realizing that tolerating the intolerant ultimately spells their triumph.

To see political correctness and Cancel Culture as the main threats to »journalism« and »freedom of expression« distracts from the real economic power relations and the resulting limitations of a diverse public discourse. Nevertheless, things are moving. The public sphere, which once seemed so homogeneous, has become more diverse and dissonant; more people can and want to have their say. Their presence in the media irritates those who controlled our social discourse in the past and are used to being courted rather than criticized. It is only logical that they are now complaining about intolerance, Cancel Culture, and political correctness – they are fearing for their power and privileges.

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