

The internal tensions of Political Correctness in the Brazilian context

Abstract

This article presents a reflection on the constitutive aspects of Political Correctness (PC). It utilizes the idea of double decontextualization developed by Norman Fairclough, to discuss the process within the PC action operates. With this framework, and the presentation of examples, the article seeks to point out that the PC criticism develops in two senses: (i) by literally interpreting the linguistic expression and (ii) an attempt to hide the subject agent of the action of criticism behind the universality of the defended value. In this sense, the strength of the PC is linked to a double decontextualization movement.

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Introduction

The article presents a reflection on the concept of Politically Correct (PC) using as reference the Brazilian political and social context. The term has appeared for the first time in the 1930's and during the XX century had a series of usages and interpretations sometimes as a criticism others as a joke or a series political action. In the XXI century the expression have been gained prominence appropriated by social movements that seek to denounce forms of prejudice and oppression against specific social groups, manifested in the use of language.¹ The PC has been adopted by the media and became commonplace in the political and cultural debate, both in the left and the right.

PC is a new term in the political vocabulary, subject to a series of interpretations and analysis. So is not possible to describe a stable accepted definition. In this sense this article discusses the PC as it is interpreted and disputed in the Brazilian political and cultural contest. The concept arrived in Brazil imported from the USA and today, even with some cultural differences, is used in a very similar way to the original manifestation.²

It is not possible to pinpoint the exact moment that the PC appeared for the first time in Brazil. The term however gained prominence in the political, the Political Correctness and it is nemesis the Political Incorrectness are present in the day to day discussion about Brazilian society and political situation. The prominence of this debate can be seen in the declarations of Brazil president Jair Bolsonaro who often refers to PC in his declarations.¹ The PC is a new phenomenon in the political debate that still needs to be fully understood. Due its influence on Brazilian politics this discussion has already started, but there are several aspects that need to be discussed to understand the ramifications and consequences of this concept.

The goal of this article is to discuss the use of the PC in the Brazilian context relating to the definition created by Norman Fairclough's in his article "Political correctness: the politics of culture and language". In this sense this article concludes that the PC actually operates two movements of decontextualization: one when literally interpreting the linguistic expression and a second when hiding the subject agent of the critical action behind the universality of the defended value.

¹<https://oglobo.globo.com/brasil/vamos-libertar-povo-do-socialismo-do-politicamente-correto-diz-bolsonaro-23339518>

Some current controversies

The PC concept goes beyond the political arena; it is discussed in the family dinners and popular media. It is usually part of an accusation that requires justification. In the Brazilian case PC has been a popular topic in the social networks, and due the characteristic of this medium, small and localized controversies have become national debates. There were hundreds of cases in which PC has been approach by the general media and politicians. In order to situate the reader about the ways PC is discussed and interpreted in the Brazilian reality this article discuss two cases, that became national debates, and were also discussed in the academia.

In February 2012 the Public Prosecutor's Office of Uberlândia decided to ban the Houaiss dictionary, on the charge that the work was racist and prejudice against gypsies. The dictionary states that the word Gypsy may be used as pejorative term as 'cheater; rogue, scammer' or 'who is attached to money; moneylender, sovina'.³

Brazilian Portuguese has two main dictionaries, popularly known by their authors name Houassis and Aurelio. Antônio Houassis (1915-1999), one of the most important Brazilian researchers, philologist, literary critic and translator is the author of the Houassis Dictionary of the Portuguese Language, completed after his death. The other work of this type is the Aurélio dictionary. Its author, Aurélio Buarque de Holanda (1910-1989), also a philologist and literary critic, published in 1975 the New Dictionary of the Portuguese Language. Although Brazilian intellectuals usually have a preference for one or another, both dictionaries are considered reference. It is important to point out that, different from Spanish the Portuguese language is not unified, Brazilian Portuguese and Portugal Portuguese share important differences and there are geopolitical disputes involving the "correct" use of Portuguese. The elaboration of these works demanded enormous dedication and discipline from the authors, even more considering that investment in culture in Brazil has always been precarious. In this sense, its authors are seen with great affection and admiration, not only in the academic environment.

The prosecutors demand, filed in a small town in the state of Minas Gerais became a national affair, even discussed in Portugal with both critics and supporters. Neves,³ point out that the dictionary is, by definition, a meta-analysis of linguistic uses. If the dictionary eventually points to the disparaging use of an expression in relation to

a specific group of people, this comes from the cultural reality that the work portrays and has no relation to their political or ethical positions. (2014, p. 158). In this sense society has a prejudicial view of gypsies and the dictionary simply point it out.

Other important issue in Brazil was the accusations of racism surrounding the works of Monteiro Lobato (1882-1948) A prolific writer was an important personality in the begin of XX century. Engaged in nationalistic causes wrote about the Brazilian issues of the time, like agriculture and industrialization. However today he is best known by his children book series *O Sítio do Pica Pau Amarelo* (The yellow woodpecker farm). Composed of 23 books released between 1920 and 1947 the history mixes the day to day routine of a small farm with magical elements of Brazilian folklore. It has five core characters, the elder owner of the farm, Dona Benta (Dona is translated as owner but in the beginning of the century is used to as respectful way to address women), their two grand-sons Lucia and Pedro, the maid Anastácia, and Emilia a doll turn to life by magic.

The series is a best seller and one of the most popular children's in Brazil history. Standard reading in schools it was also adapted to television and cinema, the last one between 2001 and 2007 by Rede Globo, Brazil's biggest television networks. The accusation of racism is usually centered on the character of Tia Anastácia (Aunt Anastácia) a black maid that is responsible by cooking, cleaning and supervise the children. The first accusations appeared in 2012 and has been on and off since them, currently is being judge by the supreme court.

As a beloved children's book, that is present in the education of a large part of society. The writer's accusation of racism generated strong repercussions, with exacerbated reactions on both sides, as illustrated in an article run by *Veja* magazine (Brazil bestselling magazine at the time): "Politically correct stupidity - Attention! STF will 'judge' today Monteiro Lobato, treated as a criminal. Or: Would Minister Fux blame Shakespeare?".²

The portrait of Anastacia is complex, the first books were released in 1920, slavery was abolished in 1888, so the character refers to an image of the slave relationships of the Brazilian past. But Anastácia is also a representation of popular wisdom and culture. A story teller she amazes the kids with folklore tales and oral culture of Brazilian countryside. Monteiro Lobato is also a controversial figure a nationalist he did an extensive effort to preserve Brazil popular culture at the same time he was a fierce advocate of the eugenics notions of the time.

Sociologist José de Souza Martins (2019, p.1) reinforced the discomfort with the treatment that Monteiro Lobato's work receives "in recent times, the caretakers of the politically correct" discovered "that Monteiro Lobato" would be racist "the author accuses the PC critic, in this case, of sectarianism and intolerance "The politically correct is incorrect when it deprives our social conscience of the poetry that is proper to life and intelligence. The poetry of mediations and wholeness that unveils the mysteries of appearance to reveal to us the essence of what we are and do not know. Without the perspective of the whole, Lobato's work becomes incomprehensible, which opens the way for the unreasonable prejudice of a hasty and inattentive reader".⁵The question of the lack of historical perspective and the decontextualization of the treated subject recurrently appears in the PC discussion.

²<https://veja.abril.com.br/blog/reinaldo/a-estupidez-politicamente-correta-atencao-stf-vai-8220-julgar-8221-hoje-monteiro-lobato-tratado-como-criminoso-ou-ministro-fux-censuraria-shakespeare/>

These cases received generated several controversies in the media, eventually discussed in academic research. Neves³ whose article has very suggestive title "From 'Politically Correct' to Incorrectly Polished", brings interesting aspects, such as a separation between right and left, or even conservative and progressive when discussing the PC. These disputes, as illustrated by the examples mentioned, can often be taken to extremes. The important fact here is to illustrate that the discussion about the PC is current and has generated a lot of controversy. A contrary reaction from the press, or from significant sectors of society, does not mean that the critics are wrong, in fact many new attitudes face fierce opposition before became socially accepted.

Politically correct and criticisms of politically correct

In this section the article discuss about how the criticism and its main constitutive elements take place, trying to preserve, as far as possible, a distance both in relation to the value of PC criticism, as well as the value of criticism to critical PC. It is important to point out that the goal of this article is not judge if the eventual PC critics are fair or relevant but to understand the process with guide these disputes.

Weinmann⁶ summarize the critical approach to the PC. The concept is wrong because it suggests a univocal relationship between the word and the person who uses it in a specific social environment. The PC is naive because it believes that, by changing the use of words in speeches, it would effectively solve the problem of discriminatory social relations. Also the PC is essentially authoritarian because seeks to restrict people's freedom of expression.

This set of criticisms, essentially correct, may not reflect well the relative importance of each of the points. From the perspective of the human sciences, one issue, perhaps, precedes the others: the lack of rigorous contextualization of the use of linguistic expression. The humanities researcher, much more than the layman and perhaps even the researcher in other areas of knowledge, is strongly trained to always place the object studied within the social relations that give it meaning and coherence.

The accusations that come from the PC defending groups almost always prioritize denouncing linguistic expression by itself. The cases mentioned above illustrate, at least in part, this characteristic. For a historian, a journalist or a social scientist, it is strange to judge a quote from a dictionary, or from a hundred year book, without considering their original context.⁷

Borges⁸ states that the use of the PC can be interpreted in opposite ways. As a mean of protect vulnerable sectors of society that have been historically persecuted, as a 1980s fad, a censorship of not any more socially accepted behaviors, or as an ethics built from the reformulation of daily language. But the author himself warns to the fact that "when instituting itself as surveillance or patrolling, politically correct militancy silences, in the unsaid part of its phraseology, about the socio-historical origins of what it so keenly wishes to modify". In other words, it removes the element of criticism from its "historical conditions", making it difficult to understand it in the cultural universe in which it manifests itself originally. (1996, 110)

Here again issue of decontextualization is present, in the author's terms, a detachment in relation to historical conditions. This is a recurring view normally associated with two distinct, yet complementary movements. On one hand, it weakens the quality of the original PC criticism as it impoverishes the exposure and, on the

other hand, it makes room for the accusations of an authoritarian or persecutory position assumed by the defenders of the PC.

Maria H. de Moura Neves (2012, p.203) participates in this debate, but in a way that seems more assertive. She writes that the PC manifests itself as a patrol wave endowed with a double meaning, on one hand it presents itself as well-intentioned and, therefore, beyond any question. On other hand, its indiscriminate use turns it into a practice as intolerable as the actions it seeks to denounce.

Norman Fairclough's contribution

Norman Fairclough in his article "Political correctness: the politics of culture and language" (2003) the author inserts the issue of language at the center of the reflection. According to the author, the PC controversy is partially, a language controversy.

The author understand the PC as an attempt by specific groups, such as feminists and anti-racists, to change the behavior and language used within specific spaces, such as workplaces or schools, "are, in the main, identifications imposed upon people by their political opponent". Thus, it constitutes a form of intervention in cultural policy seeking to transform characteristics of identity and values in the sense of social change".⁹

Fairclough perceives the question of the PC in a context of conflicts, and highlights the importance of the direct identity perception between what is said and its meaning, returning to the question of an analysis that uses a decontextualization of the discourse. The author distinguishes between the three main ways in which discourse figures in social practices: (a) discourse as positioned representations, including reflective self-representation of social practices, (b) discourse as a gender (eg, interview, lecture or conversation) (c) as a style, where the author point out the discursive difference, for example, between a political leader and a manager of a company. (Fairclough, 2003, p.23).

Fairclough writes that the PC operates a discourse decontextualization. The critics perceive the speaking concept in a literal form ignoring the entire historical and social burden that involves its manifestation and the internal aspects that constitute the discourse, namely: (a) who speaks and what set of values he carries, (b) the circumstances of the articulation of speech, his place of origin and (c) the form of expression and its effect in the wider environment.

This typification illustrates, the conceptual problems that the discussion about the PC incorporates when defining a type language as correct and other as "incorrect", the PC could be incurring a generalization of different types of possible speeches. In other words, Fairclough allows us to perceive, with more depth and complexity, the process of decontextualization operated by PC. It is not simply a matter of addressing speech outside its context, but also of impoverishing the semiotic complexity expressed in speech.

Fairclough warns of an interesting question. Pointing out a way of speaking does not necessarily lead to the transformation of habits. "Moreover, relatively successful enactment does not guarantee relatively successful inculcation: there is a stage short of inculcation at which people may acquiesce to new discourses without accepting them - they may mouth them rhetorically, for strategic and instrumental purposes, as happens, for instance, with market discourse in public services such as education."⁹

People, social subjects, can express themselves rhetorically, for strategic and instrumental purposes, for example, in formal education or in the workplace. Even the defenders of the PC when constructing

strategies such as, the 2004 booklet of the Special Secretariat for Human Rights "Politically Correct and Human Rights", end up using the political system as a way of controlling language. This is not to deny the importance of eliminate racist and prejudicial expression that seriously hurts some groups and minorities. The criticism of PC defends that the language itself is not the place to achieve this transformation, that other arenas are more efficient.^{10,11}

In the perspective pointed out in this article, Fairclough takes the debate to a higher level of complexity. The PC's criticism not only decontextualizes the discourse but also impoverishes the very reflection on the discourse, by directly relating what is literally expressed with what it means in the sense in which it is used. Furthermore, it ignores the different meanings that the discourse can take (positioned representation, gender and style).

The double decontextualization

Fairclough brings important contributions to understand the nature of PC. In addition to what the author points out, but following his line of reflection it is important to highlight the relationship between the accusation of incorrect use of language and the social subjects involved in the confrontation process. PC discussion initiates with an allegedly transgression of a universal value accepted in the environment of the speaker.

The idea of universal values is debatable and discussed in several works. The aim of this article is not to define what is universal or not. So to the scope of this research universal values are the ones described in the United Nations Charter on Human Rights, for example human dignity, freedom, equality and solidarity.

The "generality" of value, however, cannot and should not be transferred mechanically to the social subject who proclaims its defense, in a specific historical and political context. Its correct interpretation involves the need to contextualize where it comes from and how it is concretely manifested. Let's use a very appealing example to illustrate this idea. When Hitler appears in a photo holding a smiling young child, he is basing himself on a universal value, that children should be protected and cherished within society in the face of their inherent weakness and inability to defend themselves. The photo, however, has a political function, the German dictator is trying to use a universal value, politically, in the sense of legitimizing and strengthening a specific group and its project of conquering and maintaining power. That is, regardless of the universal value that is immediately present, the photo needs to be contextualized in order to be interpreted correctly.

In the case of PC is possible to find a double decontextualization. Let's think about the manifestations mentioned at the beginning of the article. Let's take, for example, the accusation of racism against the works of Monteiro Lobato. As already mentioned by other researchers, the social relations described are removed from their original context (historical, social, political, cultural) making them liable to criticism from a contemporary perspective, which the author cannot answer. This is the first decontextualization present, but the process incorporates a second decontextualization, who is denouncing? What is its origin and political function? Such a denunciation does not happen in a vacuum, even if the author hides behind the generality and legitimacy of a universal value, accepted without major resistance by the majority of society. The acceptance of value, as in the case of Hitler's photo, does not exempt the denunciation of its political dimension.

In the other example mentioned, the case of the entry “gypsy” in the Houaiss dictionary, the source of origin is the Public Prosecutor’s Office of Uberlândia, a medium city in Minas Gerais state, but it is not specified whether it responds to a complaint from some authority, social action, or act on their own initiative. It is important to highlight that the authors of the complaint can be well-intentioned and seek disinterestedly to encourage fair social relations. However a denounce cannot be accepted without a further analysis of the denouncer and the environment.

The speech acts that Austin debates in his work “How to do Things With Words”, are important references for this process. The philosopher Danilo Marcondes de Souza Filho, translated the work into Portuguese and wrote the presentation of the Brazilian edition, comments that for Austin language is always oriented from its use, that is, as a form of action. “What is being analyzed now is no longer the sentence structure with its constitutive elements, that is, the name and the predicate, or the meanings and the reference, but the conditions under which the use of certain linguistic expressions produce certain effects and consequences in a given situation.”¹²

This article does not intent to produce a profound analysis about the philosophy of language or the theoretical movement linguistic turn. However it is interesting to highlight how Austin, in the late forties, discusses the importance of concrete conditions in which a linguistic expression is used for its correct understanding. In this sense the legitimacy of a universal value does not transfer mechanically to the spokesperson for its defense, in a specific historical and temporal context.

The conflict between values

The PC also creates a conflict between two different values. On one hand the value defended by the PC, which can be a fair position regarding gender or ethnicity issues, for example. On the other hand, there is the value related to the inalienable right to free expression of ideas. The fundamental question of PC is not in the justice of its denunciation, but in convincing the people to whom it is addressed that the defense of this value justifies an aggression against another socially constituted value: freedom of expression.

This question is elaborated by Kohlberg¹³ when he refers to the sixth and final level of moral development. At this level, decisions are made by comparing the relative importance between two values involved. In a situation of conflict of values, for example, respect for life is more important than respect for property (because damage to property can later be compensated while damage to life is irreversible). Habermas¹⁴ dialogues with Kohlberg, structuring ideas on two fronts: Moral and Law.

These two values have a regulatory role in acting through understand, as a form of social relationship (respect for morals), or as a way to defend themselves against an offensive action (legal remedy). Society built the law on the basis of its moral imperatives. This means saying that, for Habermas, morals and law ensure consensus, even when understanding is not achieved. Habermas quotes Kohlberg and highlight the levels of moral development to show that failures to reach a collective consensus are more linked to the formation of people than the complexity of the issue under discussion.

In 1963 Kohlberg published “The development of children’s orientations toward a moral order: sequence in the development of moral thought”. A person who is at the highest level of moral development, called post-conventional, is someone who acts on principles, his ethics are turned to the ethics of conscience and the

ethics of responsibility. The law, in turn, is a formality that must be as long it does not conflict with the two pillars: principles and ethics. Habermas also participates in this debate, mainly in his 1989 text “Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action”.

The important thing here is to underline that PC always (and the expression ‘always’ has a strong literal meaning here) is opposing the moral value present in the individual’s right to free expression. This issue becomes more tense because the PC tends to always move (again in its strong sense) in a gray or nebulous zone, if the action is regarded as crime, the PC critic is not necessary.

Commentary on the politically incorrect and the internet in contemporary society

The PC has his nemesis the Politically Incorrect (PI), in Brazil is strongly associated with the defense of traditional conservative values. The PI is a hot topic in Brazil, we can cite, as an example, Leandro Narloch’s¹⁵ Politically Incorrect Guide to the History of Brazil, which was among the best-selling nonfiction books in Brazil, between 2010 and 2012.

The PI differs from the PC in the sense that, instead of a focus on the use of language and the search for its transformation, it seeks to work yet another reconstruction of history and social subjects, defending a conservative view of society and history. What seems important to note here, however, is that if there really is a difference in the object and in the formal appropriation that both the CP and the PI exercise, there seems to be a strong coincidence in the treatment ideas, or even in the epistemological conception. The PI also seems to effect a double decontextualization movement to prove the correctness of its position.

Let’s take two examples from the book cited. The first refers to the origins of Feijoada, a typical dish of Brazilian cuisine, generally associated with the food of Africans who arrived in the country as slaves. Brazil is a country of continental dimension, each region has a strong cultural and culinary tradition. In this context, feijoada, a black bean stew with dried meat and pork parts, appears as a dish common to several regions, which gives it a national characteristic, the author of the Politically Incorrect Guide defends that feijoada is not a typical Brazilian dish. He claims that there are no traditional African or Indian dish mixing beans and meat in a stew and that this is a traditional aspect of European cuisine.

The author also refers to quilombos and their internal structure. Brazil is one of the last countries in the world to abolish slavery, in 1888. During the lifetime of the system, escaped slave groups (although other origins exist) that organize themselves, usually in distant regions, in a social structure called quilombos. Although there are several organizational forms of quilombos, they are usually associated, both in the political perspective and in the social imagination, with the struggle for freedom and resistance against violent and unjust forms of oppression and exploitation. The author questions the theoretical characteristics of egalitarian quilombos, arguing that in Palmares, probably the best known of quilombos, there was a hierarchy and even their leader, Zumbi, have slaves of his own.

There are, in both cases, aspects of double decontextualization, in terms that we have tried to point out earlier. Feijoada appears and expands in a specific region and specific moment, where different influences intersect, from an African cultural heritage to the conditions typical of the Portuguese colonial experience in Brazil. In the same way, the quilombola organization was built by the different influences

of its environment and the moment in which they occur. Therefore, they cannot be explained by a single characteristic, even more if this characteristic is removed from its broader context.^{16,17}

It is also possible to see a second decontextualization. The subject agent of the action of criticism does not present itself politically. It is not clear which political agenda the mischaracterization of the Brazilianess of feijoada or Palmares' organizational progressivism is related. There is an evident political background here that remains hidden, or at least not clearly referenced. In the first case, there is an apparent intention to delegitimize the Brazilianes of a dish historically related with African culture. In the second case, by pointing out that organizations that originate in forms of popular resistance reproduce the same forms of oppression against which they would have revolted, the author utilize a conservative approach to history.

With regard to the broader issue of the PC, another issue that seems important to point out is how information is disseminated by electronic means in contemporary society. There is an important and heated discussion about whether the internet has, in fact, democratized access to information or, on the contrary, lowered the debate and allowed a huge legion of unprepared and uninformed people to express their opinion on everything. The important Italian philosopher Umberto Eco,¹⁸ in 2015, at a ceremony in which he received the honoris-causa title in communication and culture, at the University of Turin, made an interesting analysis. He stated that: "Social media gave legions of imbeciles the right to speak, who previously used to speak only at the bar after a glass of wine, without causing harm to the community. They were immediately told to shut up, while now they have the same right to speak as a Nobel Prize winner. The drama of the internet is that it promoted the village idiot as the bearer of the truth".

This is not about developing a discussion about the characteristics of communicative interactions in contemporary society, much less discussing with Umberto Eco. The intention is only to point to the fact that and the expansion of the PC and PI seems to be favored by characteristics of the internet, such as the speed of dissemination and the anonymity of the author.

Another aspect that is probably related to PC criticism and contemporary society is political fragmentation, the detachment of political action from politically strong and coherent groups, whether on the right or the left, for more dispersed sectors of public opinion. Although in a second moment there is an evident use of the PC and PI by political groups with clearer ideologies, in the first moment the criticisms seem to arise from individual subjects, or from small groups, identified with some specific and limited causes, that do not necessarily have a clearer and more organic alignment in terms of traditional politics. We can think here of some positions of postmodern theorists, like Lyotard¹⁹ for example, and also the discussions about identity pointed out by Stuart Hall.²⁰

Final remarks (a strong weakness)

The PC is made, in general, from the defense of a universal value shared by the social environment in which it takes place and, often, even shared by the subject to whom the criticism is directed. This provokes, in most cases, an answer trying to justify that the real intention was not to deviate from the value in question. PC criticism often make use of a linguistic or artistic expression outside the original context in which it is created, that is, decontextualized, as the initial examples of Monteiro Lobato and the Houaiss Dictionary point out.

Fairclough advances the discussion bringing not only the impoverishing aspect of the reflection on the discourse when making

a literal interpretation of the speech term, but also the fact that the critic ignores the different meanings that the discourse can assume.

We also try to highlight here, following the same line of reasoning, the importance of knowing the subject that is the agent of the PC action and the context in which it occurs. Criticism does not originate in a neutral space or in a social vacuum. The PC and PI ca only be correctly understood as soon as the characteristics of the social environment from which it comes and the political logic that moves the action of its authors are known. Habermas and Kholberg help to perceive the existence of a conflict between a specific value that the PC (and incorrect) denounces and the right to freedom of expression.

We think, therefore, that the concept of CP should always be perceived as a manifestation constituted by internal tensions, taking into account its double decontextualization nature, understood here as (a) a decontextualization of the speech term in relation to its historical position and original social context and (b) a decontextualization of the author of the critical PC in relation to his identity, environment and political interests.

In the Brazilian case, this discussion seems to occur in an unoriginal way, essentially seeking to reproduce movements similar to those that occurred abroad, mainly in the USA, generating even resistances and criticisms very similar to those that can be observed there. Perhaps the most original movement is the idea of rewriting history itself in a somewhat reversed sense, as illustrated by the Politically Incorrect Guide to the History of Brazil, with the reservations already mentioned.

Finally, we point out the importance of, at another time, deepening a reflection on these themes and their articulation with the impact of the internet on communications and the fragmentation of individual action and political groups in contemporary society.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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