



# To Theorize Is To Intimidate

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**Dominique Lecourt**

## Opinion



Attempts to understand the phenomenon of political correctness now form a respectable corpus of work. It is a study close to one of *The Europeans*' core proclivities, as a glance at the tag-cloud confirms. Although often mocked as “moral vanity”, political correctness nevertheless deserves serious sociological study, not least because of the enormous impact it has had on the fate of the West. Perhaps only those with long enough teeth to remember an earlier time can assess this impact. There was indeed a time before political correctness took the Occident in its icicle-fingers, and subjected it to the slow, nightmarish drip of cant that we have lived with, *or for*, ever since. But while ever exasperation remains a faculty of Man, practitioners of PC run the risk one day of sending it *critical*.

Political sagacity is not cumulative. A great civilization, such as classico-Christian Europe, is safe only insofar as its incumbent leaders are both educated in history *and* free from the narcissistic desire for bronze avatars. European leaders of our era appear to have inherited nothing from their Continent's vast historical experience: instead, they invented the European Commission, and talked to it as they might to an imaginary friend.

What *does* accumulate and constantly re-synthesize itself through the passage of time is the high culture of a civilization. The Colombian writer Nicolás Gómez Dávila says somewhere that soul “*emerges*” in things that endure. Political correctness is inimical to high culture because of the former’s “normative frenzy” in pursuit of “equality”. Egalitarianism attacks high culture — notably through the schools, mocking it with its own “pop” travesty. (Witness the loss of classical languages from the curriculum in France.) The hoisting of one travesty after another is seeing to it that when the neoliberal mist rises, little recognizable will be left of European civilization. The loss of Palmyra and Nimrud is both visceral and symbolic for Europe. The forces that destroyed them are exaggerated only in degree and modality, not in kind, relative to the western intelligentsia’s and *nomenklatura*’s much paler destructive enterprise. Ultimately, the result will be much the same.

**Dominique Lecourt** is a French philosopher. Here, he talks with Alexis Feertchak about the mercurial menace of PC, in an extended interview for *Le Figaro*.



TRANSLATION EDWARD SHILLING/THE EUROPEANS



Le Figaro | Alexis Feertchak | Dominique Lecourt

## **Dominique Lecourt: Political correctness favours the return of all kinds of violence**

FIGAROVOX/GRAND ENTRETIEN : The French philosopher Dominique Lecourt has accorded an extended interview to FigaroVox. The director of the Institut Diderot denounces a political correctness that, through the instrument of the law, passes perilously from words to deeds.

Dominique Lecourt was a student of Georges Canguilhem et Louis Althusser. The author of more than thirty books and several large dictionaries, his last published work is, “Egoism: Is it really necessary to think of others? (*éditions Autrement*, 2015).

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**FIGAROVOX : Recently adopted by the Senate, the law on Equality and Citizenship, which contains a series of 217 measures on youth, social integration, and against social discrimination, makes much of “real equality”. Doesn’t enforcing real equality risk too great an encroachment on personal liberties, and also extending political correctness from words to things?**

**Dominique Lecourt** : This law is an extreme example of the idea of democracy that has weighed on our country for some thirty years. It’s a grand bazaar that gathers together in tragic-comic confusion all the received prohibitions that we now expect to regulate behaviour. Take for example the prohibition of smacking as an educational encouragement, and the condemnation that falls on the use of words considered wounding because supposedly contrary to the dogmatic ideals of “communal living” [*vivre ensemble*]. In my view, it’s the culmination of this normative frenzy, all too fashionable these days, whose authoritarian character has been the subject of permanent denial on the part of the intellectuals and media that propagate it. With a hypocritical flourish, progress in the cause of freedom-for-all is announced while plans for its meticulous undoing are already in preparation. The progression from words to deeds can be checked only by force. This idea leads to an authoritarian style of political power. Intimidation is its principal recourse. Witness the now incessant appeals to the courts... There’s no lack of associations specializing in this kind of blackmail. The problem runs deep. Structural suspicion destroys the trust that is indispensable to life in society.

Let me give you an example. In French universities, since 1968, we've been chasing down taboos in the name of the famous "it is forbidden to forbid"[*il est interdit d'interdire*]. We offered sacrifices to the cult of the taboo-breakers. Each victory was feted by an ever more libertarian press. Think of [the leftwing daily] *Libération* in those days. Look up some 'vintage' articles from *Le Monde*, which threw the weight of its reputation into the fray whenever it was a matter of attacking the "*bourgeois*" conception of the family, or of education. Today, the editorial staff of these dailies would no doubt again choke with rage on re-reading articles of the time concerning that same conception of the family. The same dailies fell over each other to support gay marriage [*mariage pour tous*]. What a contradiction! Logic would have demanded that they came out against all forms of marriage, including for individuals of the same sex....

By contrast, on the other side of the Atlantic, when I arrived at the University of Boston at the beginning of the 1980s, they were busy cooking up new prohibitions. Tyranny fell on the language used across a large swathe of academe, especially in the domain of the human sciences (from psychology to philosophy, and taking in economics). Rapidly, this tyranny swept beyond the academic *milieux* to submerge the whole of social life. Ten years later, the wave hit France violently. The beginning of the tidal-wave. And a tsunami doesn't just flood a vase, it shatters it... Very soon, we saw university administrators and teachers modify their behaviour, especially in the presence of the opposite sex. Nobody closed the door of his office anymore, when receiving a student of either sex. It was as though every teacher, every administrator, could be considered a potential rapist!

Paradoxically, the elimination of taboos proves toxic to freedom of thought. It produces timorous people, enemies of risk. This new 'tentative' generation suffers from prudishness.

Let's not systematically confound inequality and injustice. At the risk of offending, I recall that inequalities exist that are by no means considered injustices. Take salaries, for example. The fact that remuneration for work can be linked to merit does not always represent an injustice: except of course for those who do not recognize the value of merit... Again, take the example of my colleagues in the Ministry of Education. Ought seniority outweigh quality of work in any promotion, as it does today? The results are not brilliant...

In the name of real equality, we are witnessing a spectacular alliance between technocracy and moralism, on the pretext of making everyone happy despite themselves.

**Before it was taken up by the Marxists, the expression "politically correct" was coined by the Supreme Court of the United States in 1793. Jean-Claude Michéa considers, moreover, that political correctness is the "triumph of the juridification of human relations", as against the "common decency" defended by Orwell. What does this "juridification" signify?**

The word "juridification" designates a structure for the standardization of human relations. Does it mark a step forward for freedom? To my mind, it's rather a symptom of freedom's demise. Take an example from where the ridiculous is hardly unknown. Did you know that you have to avoid using the word "violate" [*violer*] in the sense of "violating a law", in view of the offensive resonance it can take on [rape]? Proper decorum is demanded of the language, especially in matters of race, culture and religion. The despised word "race" still appears in the Constitution, despite the spirit of the Law Gayssot of 13th July, 1990, which criminalizes all racist, anti-Semitic, and xenophobic acts. A lot could be said about this law. Paul Ricœur, Pierre Vidal-Naquet, Robert Badinter and many others have begun the critical commentary. The minorities have seized hold of political correctness. Raymond Boudon was right. It's an instrument for the conquest of power, not by conformist majorities but by the well-organised and active minorities who are propagating their own conformism. Often with a religious tinge. Faced with the explosive affair of the dismissal of the employee

wearing an islamic headscarf, Elisabeth Badinter had the courage and the strength to defend the management of the day-nursery Baby-Loup, although she has paid the price. The day-nursery imposed neutrality and respect for secularism on its staff.

**Could we be witnessing today the terminal decline of the ‘euphemization’ of society, of the reign of linguistic substitutions, of circumlocutions; the death of all practices that smack of social control exercised by and through language?**

Judged from the Left of the campuses, the politically correct critique turned upside down during the 1980s. Well before Éric Zemmour in France, to name but one, thousands of conservatives in the United States lost no opportunity to mock the elaborate language employed for the sake, albeit illusory, of preserving and defending minorities. They demonstrated that it was all about thinly disguised censure or self-censure.

The years 1976-78 mark a turning point in the history of philosophy at home, here in France. Philosophers at that time struck the pose of the spectator of events, the “reporter of ideas”. They declared themselves “transcendental journalists”, to borrow the expression of Maurice Clavel. They claimed to be floating above the contingencies of the present. I have already described how I saw Michel Foucault himself momentarily yield to it, fascinated by the “revolution of non-power” of Ayatollah Khomeini... André Glucksmann pushed the logic of this withdrawal further than the others. In *Les Maîtres penseurs* [The Master Thinkers], he denounces all attempts to think about the world in order to change it as slyly opening the way to the menace of totalitarianism, that is, the total ruin of freedom. Perhaps you are not aware of his writings. I draw your attention to his key insight, which is redolent of the purest intimidation: “to theorize is to terrorize”.

To summarize. Philosophers would henceforth have no more to do than to echo events with quick-fire moral judgements. You will have no difficulty in putting a name to the most celebrated of our philosopher-warlords... [BHL, Bernard-Henri Lévy? — Ed.]

Philosophy in the media would henceforth be a matter of commentary and exhortation. You know the refrain: “Things are going badly”, but “they would perhaps go worse still if we tried to change them”. And so we were advised in the name of philosophy to console ourselves and be satisfied with our little Occidental oasis. The fate of political correctness shows us that it is more profoundly a rhetoric of dissuasion. This logic of collective inertia expresses itself in the perpetual denigration of a certain manner of thinking *à la Française*. What the Americans, paradoxically, never cease to celebrate as *French theory*. Foucault, Derrida, Bourdieu, Lacan or Barthes... Today, in our universities, especially in the human sciences, we find little other than the by-products of American research. Look at “gender studies”! A fine example of political correctness...

**Philippe Muray talked about the “cage of neurotics” [*cage aux phobes*], alluding to all the proscribed language that the politically correct would like to eliminate. Would you say that political correctness still prospers, or is it being worn down by its critics?**

This narrative of consolation or exhortation as it was practised with success for a time, had real impact only by virtue of the crisis that rumbled on the horizon.

Today, in a time of globalization, European orthodoxy seeks to protect its standard of living and way of life. Look at the populist movements in the countries of northern Europe, even in Germany.

A page turns. Violent language is now out in the open. It no longer makes us laugh. If people are still killed today, in the name of God, on the streets of our big towns, it is in large part due to political correctness.

My friend André Comte-Sponville believes that the future of political correctness will be to clear the way for populism in its most violent form. I agree with him. The time for consolation and exhortation is over...

The strength of political correctness lies in its ability to create illusions. It seems to be declining even when it prospers. Bearer of taboos, it feeds on their denunciation. A linguistic neo-puritanism corresponds to radical moralizing. To this day, it absorbs without difficulty the criticisms of which it is the target, but it is not impossible that one day the exasperation it causes will transform itself into the outright fury that will mark its defeat. Think about the May 2016 victory of Rodrigo Duterte in the Philippines' presidential election: he would make Donald Trump pass for the most courteous of (political) men.

**The traditional republican model does not recognize the existence of different communities, only that of the French people. Does political correctness, the weapon of many of the minorities, serve communitarianism and multiculturalism?**

With the notion of the republican model, we're getting to what I would call the fundamental misunderstanding of modern politics in France. To the source of all the incomprehension that separates the liberal Anglo-Saxon world from our own... We've been hearing for several years that the values of the Republic are in danger, without being told exactly what they are. They would be threatened by a party we don't mention by name, but which is nonetheless legal, and if the polls are to be believed, is the premier party of France. These "outbursts" [*dérapages*] in the public discourse of the National Front are made the personal responsibility of its supporters. "Outburst" is a keyword of political correctness. A means of intimidation that encourages the belief in a single correct way of thinking, a true path in relation to which we must all be judged. This is to risk a violent reversal.

It's probably possible to reframe the question of communitarianism in ideological terms. I mean here that the administrative practice of politics in a technocratic regime gives rise, by reaction, to the demand for an absolute that politics neither can nor is willing to satisfy. As a result, this demand finds itself channelled against the reigning political power by all those who know how to seize it for their own purposes.

Since political power no longer holds to any ideal beyond the efficient operation of the State (and the economy), the passion that human beings feel for "being together" can now be satisfied only by gathering together in communities. A lethal hatred then starts to flow from "community" to "community". This is why our much vaunted democracy now finds itself in real danger.

How to exit from this vortex? Perhaps by reminding ourselves of what is rather woodenly expressed in the word "secularism" [*laïcité*]. It's not a philosophical idea, or even a collection of institutions and laws, that it would be a question of "defending". First, it would be the recognition of politics as the domain of ideals and values freely held by equally sovereign citizens. Yes, in a democratic republic, it is vital not only to separate the State from all the religions, but also to keep alive the ideality of the aims of politics, and the desire for constant renewal through a collective effort of critical reflection, in which everyone engages that part of himself that belongs to others. Is that enough? No. Because this very ideality can be placed at the disposal of a synthesis, of a lethal "communion" of citizens and state power, as we've seen in the totalitarian regimes (Soviet Union, Nazi Germany etc.). And so it's vital to restore the edge to that great intuition that comes to us from the French Revolution: there is, under such a regime, no principle more valuable in rallying the citizens than that of "freedom". Freedom announced directly from the mouth of political power to all citizens, addresses them as individuals. [...]. Passions and rational thought are thus firmly coupled, the one perpetually reviving the other. This principle allows us to avert the two major and conjoint risks run by democracy, should it wish to come out of its technocratic sleep: the

totalitarian synthesis emerging around political ideals, and in its absolute form, taking the place of God; and the sacralization of established social hierarchies.

On 17th September, 2014, when he hadn't yet revealed the broad outlines of his campaign for 2017, Alain Juppé defended before the Institut Diderot a position resolutely anti-communitarian, emphasizing the ideal of the "common good" as a dynamic movement that recognizes the identity of the Nation, which in turn gives us our heritage. We've since ardently discussed the idea of "integration" that he advanced: the "happy identity" [*l'identité heureuse*]. This idea, as he expresses it, aims to be respectful of differences, and particularly of religious differences.

Would it not be preferable to support the idea of "assimilation"? Without doubt, if we wished to surmount the difficulties associated with the use of this term, which has been subverted by some: perhaps by concocting some amalgam of "integration" and "assimilation"?

**Several media intellectuals like Michel Onfray and Alain Finkielkraut stand accused of playing the game of the National Front, even of being "fellow travellers". Has it become impossible to discharge calmly the role of public intellectual?**

That's the risk of accepting the media platform. My teacher, Georges Canguilhem, was completely hostile to it. Today, assisted by social media, one can expect to be drawn into regrettably uncivil discussions. Debate is now just a free-for-all. It's a matter of who shouts the loudest: and from there, of bringing back the "fellow traveller" slur, much abused by the Communist Party in its time... It's just about a rhetorical technique crafted to disqualify the interlocutor. It's not a calm way of debating, and very unjust in regard to Alain Finkielkraut and even Michel Onfray.

Academics today are ready to submit to any kind of conformism, all of them falling over each other to be the first to think and act like everyone else... One thinks, here again, of the study of "gender", of the phenomenon of "gender studies"... The problem lies in their concrete repercussions for national education, on pupils and parents... As for the influence of the media circus on intellectuals, it can only grow...

**In due course, could political correctness not risk encouraging the most extreme political parties, and ultimately liberate violent language?**

If we're talking about violent language in politics today, we can't overlook the "Trump case". In comparison to him, Mrs. Clinton looked like the very incarnation of political correctness; and he, that of gross impropriety. But it's clear that the serious political questions that urge themselves onto the United States go far beyond the rhetorical aspects of the campaign. Violent language can translate into either of the opposing extremist registers.

Democratic societies, avid for equality, have denied their citizens the support of a hierarchy that would guarantee them a stable relationship with their fellows. Individuals, left to their own devices and isolated, have lost that pleasing sense of the continuity between generations. Alexis de Tocqueville saw clearly when he wrote that "the aristocracy had made of the citizens a long chain extending from peasant to king; democracy breaks the chain and sets each link apart". Democracy therefore reduces each individual to himself alone and "threatens to lock him up completely in the solitude of his own heart". That's a compact formula for democratic individualism. This kind of individualism triumphed after the destruction of the classical conception of the ego. The individual now finds himself "un-individuated" [*désingularisé*]. He has lost his own history, that which in his view constructed his value. Every citizen reveals himself to be disposed to separation from his fellows, which drives each to create a miniature society for his private use, abandoning wider society to itself. This is why democratic societies give rise to the conformism of citizens submitted to the

mechanics of mass individualism: an individualism that nourishes the egoism of competition and indifference. It broadens out into narcissism.

With all the issues raised by the deployment of political correctness, the mind is engaged in a perilous reflexive exercise that decides the meaning we ought to assign to our existence. Are we to adapt our lives to the demands of others? We find ourselves at a critical juncture.