

## A HISTORICAL AND PSYCHO-SOCIO-POLITICAL ANALYSIS CONCERNING THE EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS IN NORTH AMERICA BETWEEN THE 1960's AND 1980's

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**Abstract:** *This article focuses upon the evolution of political correctness between the 1960's and 1980's from a socio-psychological point of view. In time, the socio-psychological vision, through scientific experiments carried out both in the laboratory and on the field, has also dealt with themes inherent to inter-group relations and prejudice. In the article The field of socio-psychological study will be defined and various studies regarding groups, prejudice and the real possibility of their being applied on a large scale and not only to small groups in a laboratory will be illustrated briefly. Through the previously mentioned studies will analyze the emergence and evolution of political correctness. In the second part of article will concern focused regarding the North American racial integration policies which were introduced by advocates of political correctness in relation to those policies brought in by less extreme liberal groups. The latter, owing to the philosophy of their laws inherent to social policy followed the modus operandi suggested by social science. The conclusion will regard whether those social policies inherent to ethnic integration which were introduced according to the theory of political correctness have achieved better results than those proposed by less extreme liberal groups.*

**Keywords:** *American Creed; Black Planters; Contact Theory; New Left; Political correctness*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

As a specific field of reference, social psychology investigates the connection between the psychic world and the social world. The interaction between the individual and other group members refers both to the affective sphere, family, and friends, and to the working sphere or to that sphere relative to inter-group interaction (Zamperini, 2006). No group is ever static but always in evolution; due to the conduct of its members a group modifies itself dynamically from within, and at the same time its members modify themselves when assuming the values of their group of belonging (Lewin, 1948). Sherif (1966) noted that there are two constants in the formation of groups: the creation of a hierarchy and the creation of shared norms. Owing to shared norms, whether or not behaviour is to be retained socially acceptable is established by the group (Abrams *et al.*, 2000).

In 1958, W. G. Allport wrote *The Nature of Prejudice* in which he underlined that prejudice is to be considered as a normal cognitive process and not as an abnormal process as some theories of the times postulated: *The Theory of Frustration and Aggression* by Donald and Miller, and Adorno's

*Theory of the Authoritarian Personality*. According to Allport, prejudice emerges the moment in which a *Process of Categorization* is used. *Categorization* is a process used by individuals to cope with their reduced capacity to elaborate the heavy flow of information coming from outside, from people, objects and situations, and that information which comes from within generated by emotions. An individual uses strategies to facilitate his ability to give meaning to the large amount of information to which he must give an answer. *Category* corresponds to a cluster of stimuli which share common features; a *generalization*. When a person is solicited to elaborate new requests, that is, *information*, he consults the knowledge already in his possession, that is, *category*, so as to give it meaning (Tajfel *et al.*, 1971). Allport considered *the process of categorization* in the following way:

The human mind must think with the aid of categories (equivalent of generalization). Once formed, categories are the basis for normal prejudice. We cannot possibly avoid this process. Orderly living depends upon it. (Allport, 1958:171)

According to Allport, people use *category* and prejudice on a daily basis when making decisions. When an individual is in doubt as to the *categorization* of a stimulus, this stimulus may assume either a positive or negative meaning. This is due to the fact that both individuals and groups use their own categories to give meaning to those stimuli most similar to *the new* which must be categorized (Brown, 1995). For instance, should an individual or a group have a negative vision of Afro-Americans, it is more likely that they will categorize a person of mixed race either negatively or positively according to whether his features are more *Negroid* or *Caucasian*.

Prejudice manifests itself through stereotyping and with time has taken on a negative value (Mazzara, 1996). This is notwithstanding the fact that prejudice, and so the category of reference, depend upon the information which an individual has in his possession regarding a given concept or group of people (Voci, 2003). In the event of an individual's entering into possession of new information inherent to things or people previously considered as negative, he might reconsider the value he attributed initially. When facing new elements, remodelling a general category into a *sub-category* allows an individual to change his point of view with the exception of when he finds himself in certain scenarios, such as in the case of a struggle for limited resources or the maintenance of dominant status. Thus, to bring about a change of vision, whether positive or negative, an individual always uses a strategy of categorization which manifests itself through stereotyping. Given this, it is not prejudice itself which is negative but the capacity of the individual to construct ever more sub-categories inherent to the information which surrounds him. When directed at groups of people, *the process of categorization* takes the name of *social categorization*<sup>1</sup>. (Capozza and Brawn, 2000).

In the chapter entitled "Formation of the Ingroup" in his book *The Nature of Prejudice*, Allport presupposed that ingroup behaviour was "psychologically primary" in the sense that ties and the favouring of ingroup members were antecedent to the development of any attitude shown towards outgroup members (Kenworthy, Turner, Hewstone & Voci 2005; Pettigrew, 1998). Allport identified that

positive attitudes towards the ingroup were not necessarily only bound to hostile attitudes towards the outgroup due to competition for material resources, as sustained by Sheriff (1966) in his *Theory of Realistic Contact*, but could be linked to other factors such as the maintenance of superior status over other groups.

According to Allport, when the ingroup feels threatened, it will activate negative prejudice towards the outgroup and this prejudice may be expressed through the following behaviour: (1) Anti-locution prejudice; talking ill of the outgroup; (2) Avoidance; keeping a distance from members of the disliked group even perhaps at the cost of considerable inconvenience; (3) Discrimination; making detrimental distinctions of an active sort, not employing outgroup members in some areas of work, refusing to rent out cars and apartments to them; (4) Physical attack; violence or semi-violence; (5) Extermination; lynching program.

The *Contact Theory* was first postulated in the 1950's. This theory studies the effects of contact between groups which are different in terms of: status, ethnicity, educational level and gender in reference to the lessening of the prejudice held by differing groups one towards the other. There are many studies regarding *The Contact Theory* which provide proof both in favour and against that intergroup contact can be effective in the attenuation of prejudice (Sheriff 1966, Admir 1969, Brewer 1988, Brown and Capozza 2000, Hustone and Brow, 2005). In 2006, the empirical validity of the *Contact Theory* was unequivocally highlighted by the meta-analysis of Pettigrew and Tropp who examined 515 studies for a total of 250,494 participants from 38 different nations.

In 1954, Allport defined *Contact Theory*. This theory identified four fundamental elements through which diverse groups might relate to one another both positively and efficiently: positive and pleasant interaction, similar status, possibility of prior consciousness and institutional support (Robert, 2000). In the United States between the 1960's and 1970's, *Contact Theory* had an application effect which aimed to control and reduce the forms of racism which hindered the recognition of civil rights (de Carvalho, 1993).

In 1954, during the *Brown vs Topeka Board of Education Case*, The United States Supreme Court accepted the requests from Brown. The ruling in favour of Brown ended racial segregation in American schools. Allport was also highly impressed by the fact that a clear reference was made in the

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of social categorization would be readdressed and furthered by Tajfel in the 1970's in his Theory of Social Identity and later, by his pupil Turner in his Theory of the Self. These two theories would then be readdressed by other academics such as Hustone and Brown. For ulterior information one can consult Capozza, D., Brown R. (2000) Social Identity Process, Sage, London

# A HISTORICAL AND PSYCHO-SOCIO-POLITICAL ANALYSIS CONCERNING THE EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS IN NORTH AMERICA BETWEEN THE 1960's AND 1980's

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ruling to the results of the social sciences (Cheney, 2011).

## 2. POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

One difficulty with the debate regarding *Political Correctness* is that there is little agreement as to what the expression actually means. Here are two definitions of *Political Correctness* to show the differing and animated visions underlying debate on the subject. It is widely believed that the term *Political Correctness* was first used by Lenin following the Russian Revolution and by Mao Tse-tung during the Cultural Revolution in China<sup>2</sup>. Lenin hypothesized that the orthodoxy of an individual's behaviour towards *the State*, that is, *the Party*, should correspond to the dicta given by *the State* to its citizens. Thus, *political correctness* described the behaviour of a citizen who followed the rules of *the State* in every area of society (Ellis, 2002:409). As a member of the *Chinese Communist Party* from the early 1920's, Mao Tse-tung adopted a form of *Communism*, later known as *Maoism*, which drew upon both *Marxism* and *Leninism*. This vision of *Socialism* was operationalized, just as in Russia under Lenin, by means of the creation of *Party Officers* and the formation of citizens who were needed for the modernization of China; "*correct attitudes and beliefs*" (Lin, 1991, p.57) corresponded to what *the State* required of its citizens.

At the end of the 1960's, the New Left emerged as a counter-culture. This movement expressed itself through cultural and political rebellion against the socio-political values which *capitalist America* had hitherto upheld. C. Wright Mills, considered one of the most eminent New Left theorists, addressed the concept of *Utopia* in his 1960 article "Letter of the New Left":

New Left, what needs to be analysed is the structure of institutions, the foundations of policies. In this sense, both in its criticism and in its proposals, our work is necessarily structural and so, for us, just now. (Mills, 1960:3)

The New Left were contrary to *Capitalism* based on *Liberalism* and the bureaucracy of *Communism*.

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<sup>2</sup> However, Wilson (1995) traced the earliest origins of the expression *Political Correctness* as far back as 1793 to a Supreme Court case in the United States, but at that time, it was used in the literal sense as a political process that was not in the correct form. For ulterior information one can consult (Wilson, J. K. (1995). *The myth of political correctness: The conservative attack on higher education*. Durham: Duke University Press.

The New Left's aim was to change socio-cultural values by means of both violent and non-violent methods (Kristhol, 2005).

As a theoretical framework, the New Left adopted the Frankfurt School model. This model was a combination of Marxist-style analysis and Freudian psychoanalysis which was later to be known as *Critical Theory* (Deutscher & Lafont, 2017). This theory consisted largely of destructive criticism towards the principal components of Western culture:

Christianity, capitalism, authority, the family, patriarchy, hierarchy, morality, tradition, sexual restraint, loyalty, patriotism, nationalism, heredity, ethnocentrism, convention and conservatism. (Sutton, 2008:16).

As far as the struggle for civil rights is concerned, the New Left adopted the thinking of Fanon, Du Bois, Malcolm X, Asante and Diopé. Between the 1960's and the 1980's, the still ongoing struggles of the New Left were centred upon human rights: freedom of speech, equality for men and women and, over the last few years, the acknowledgement of LGBT rights (Stein, 2015). This focus entailed criticism of *the Establishment* in a merely theoretical context, that is, without considering either feasibility or the resources available to satisfy requests which were made. New Left thinking was based upon what was regarded as *right* or *wrong* and once that something was deemed *right*, it had to be applied since it was morally correct, that is, *politically correct*, to do so. The New Left's ideas were unequivocal and not dialectically questionable. In an attempt to denigrate New Left philosophy, it was the conservatives to call this way of thinking *Political Correctness* as they believed that the New Left operated only in accordance with their own ideology (Moller, 2016).

Following their ideals of *Political Correctness*, since the 1960's, the New Left has operated in various fields: linguistics, history, sociology, pedagogy, psychology, political science and urban planning. In Western Society today, at least at a formal level *Political Correctness* has remodelled the norms of socially acceptable behaviour both at an interpersonal and inter-group level (Dzenis, 2020).

A definition of *Political Correctness* poses many problems given that socially acceptable norms are those which follow New Left thinking and clash ideologically with the thinking of Liberals and Conservative Democrats and this has triggered what is known as *The Cultural War* (Hunter, 1991). This term refers to the struggle for the affirmation of the

New Left's political vision versus the conservative vision inherent to beliefs, values and social practice.

### 3. CIVIL RIGHTS AND POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

The civil rights issue entered the North American political agenda a few years prior to the outbreak of the American Civil War (1861-1865) with the debate in favour of the abolition of slavery in all states (Ranney, 2006). One of the earliest analyses regarding the condition of Afro-Americans was the study published by Gunnar Myrdal<sup>3</sup> in his book *An American Dilemma: The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy*. Written in 1944, this book made an accurate analysis of the socio-economic and psycho-social situation in which Afro-Americans were living in the United States (Kinball, 1944). Myrdal (1948:197) paid attention to the plight of Afro-Americans seeing it as a moral issue which concerned aspects inherent to a group's basic values and he made particular reference to the concept of *the American Creed*:

I believe in the United States of America as a government of the people, by the people, for the people; [...] established upon those principles of freedom, equality, justice, and humanity for which American patriots sacrificed their lives and fortunes.

In his analysis, Myrdal underlined how the ideals of *the American Creed* were not extended to the Afro-American population in that Afro-Americans were the target of prejudice, limitations regarding access to employment, education and the right to vote. Myrdal believed that education and work were the two fundamental elements in the Afro-American struggle for emancipation. In 1948, Myrdal wrote:

For the Negro masses, the absence for several years of mass unemployment in America must have given them some real chances; for all to get employment and earn incomes; for an increasing proportion of Negro workers to enter the better-paid trades and to acquire also, in time, the training necessary for keeping those jobs and even advancing in them. (Myrdal, 1948:197)

Myrdal verified that it was the Afro-Americans themselves who were the most trusting of *the*

*American Creed*; they believed that emancipation could be achieved through Constitutional Dictate. Myrdal supported the non-violent struggle for the affirmation of black minorities advocated by Martin Luther King, the then leader of *The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)*. The fact that King was an ardent supporter of *the American Creed* allowed him to forge relationships with Institutional Establishments so that his cause might be legitimized through Constitutional Dictate (Craig, 1996).

King's strategy for the acknowledgement of civil rights for Afro-Americans succeeded in merging the moral ideals of *the American Creed* at the level of Nation with positive practical effects and this favoured the battle for equal rights and duties in a nation where a distinction between *Black* and *White* should have no place (Kennedy, 1989).

During the 1960's, the New Left, as champions of political correctness, regarded the American Civil Rights issue differently (Lichtenstein N., Flacks R. (2015). The 1960's witnessed the formation of radical New Left groups fighting for the self-determination of Afro-Americans and these groups requested the Government to introduce equal rights immediately (Breines, 1988). This led to human rights being a much-debated topic in those years. At the end of the 1960's, American society began to question all those values upon which its society was based, that is, *White Anglo-Saxon Protestantism* (Hosman, 1997).

From the mid 1960's, civil rights groups other than the NAACP began to appear. These new groups considered non-violent resistance as something formal yet insubstantial (Mammarella, 1984). For this reason, these groups recognized that New Left ideas combined with a more radical and violent approach constituted the most effective way to acquire rights (Williams, 2015). One of the most widely-known radical groups of the period was the Black Panther Party (BPP) which, in 1967, published its *Ten-Point Program*, the first point of which included the following statement: "We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black Community." Underlining their constitutional right to freedom, the BPP would have to accept all other aspects of the Constitution (Abron, 1986). Since the BPP regarded the Black Community as being distinct from other communities in American society, implied the non-recognition of the Constitution and hence, an antagonistic approach towards the State (Heynen, 2009). Following the declamation of their *Ten-Point Program*, the BPP began to carry out armed patrols in the San Francisco Bay area (Boykoff & Gies,

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<sup>3</sup>Myrdal (1898-1987) was an academic and a politician. He was a member of the Swedish Social Democratic Party and held various governmental positions. In 1950, he was one of the signatories of "The Race Question" drawn up by UNESCO and in 1974, sharing the prize with Friedrich von Haye, he won the Nobel for Economics.

**A HISTORICAL AND PSYCHO-SOCIO-POLITICAL ANALYSIS CONCERNING  
THE EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS  
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2010). These patrols were introduced to defend the BPP themselves from the Police who the BPP looked upon as being “representative of a government from which one had to protect oneself, even using arms.” (Benvenuti, 2016)

#### 4. CONCLUSIONS

Evaluating their policies from a scientific psycho-social angle and not from an ideological point of view, one can see that the Afro-American racial integration policies adopted by Martin Luther King and the BPP involved the use of different strategies. King's strategy for the acknowledgement of civil rights for Afro-Americans succeeded in merging the moral ideals of *the American Creed* at the level of Nation with positive practical effects and this favoured the battle for equal rights and duties in a nation where a distinction between *Black* and *White* should have no place (Johnson L. B, 1964).

This idea of a *Single Nation* offered the vision that the *Black Minority Group*, that is, the outgroup, did not constitute an obstacle in the achievement of a more prestigious status for the Nation. This allowed for the beginning of a restructuration of the Afro-American category by means of a process of sub-categorization. This also called a halt to a large proportion of the white population's stereotyping of Afro-Americans and the beginning of their looking upon the Afro-American population as a potential resource. This was also facilitated by the attention given by Federal and Governmental Institutions. Owing to his policy, King was able to achieve three out of the four points of Allport's *Contact Theory*: positive and pleasant interaction, possibility of prior consciousness and institutional support.

The BPP's strategy for the recognition of civil rights for Afro-Americans was based upon the differentiation between the black ingroup and the white outgroup. The BPP did not regard established institutions as a means through which they could achieve their ends; they did not acknowledge the norms of the *American People*, the group to which they belonged, and this bolstered the stereotyping of Afro-American sub-culture. Initially, the BPP's *Zandov* vision gained the support of both the elite and the poor Afro-American population. After only a few years, however, approval began to decline. Differently, King's strategy which gained public approval more slowly proved more effective in the struggle for the acquisition of civil rights for Afro-Americans.

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