



# Wokeness and neo-puritanism

COMMENTARY | BY GEORGE PAGOULATOS \*

**My first brush** with political correctness was surprisingly traumatic. It was during a seminar at university in England while I was developing an argument: "If we assume that one does this, then he will do that, etc." Absorbed in my train of thought, I had not noticed the mounting anger of a fellow student, a Canadian feminist, until she exploded: "You keep saying 'he.'" All your references are masculine! It's sexist **and** unacceptable," she berated me.

I had to get to know the aggressive version of political correctness before I would appreciate its calm necessity. Like every other movement of its kind, it employs hyperbole to underline its position, seeking to broaden the scope **and** reach of its protection.

I read the tirades here in Greece against political correctness – all coming from the right of the political spectrum. A significant number of people, usually constants in the mediums of public debate **and** whose freedom of expression has never been challenged, have discovered a new response to what they term the "tyranny of political correctness." It's important to remember these aren't people at some lefty-liberal university on the West Coast of the United States, where fundamentalist political correctness has indeed been taken to an extreme **and** often destroys people. These are people living **and** writing in Greece: The country where "men" abuse their partners to protect their "honor"; where employers regard their secretaries as chattel; where homosexuals are referred to in the vilest of terms; where the children of migrants – like our pole-vauling champion Emmanuel (Manolis) Karalis – end up sobbing on the school bench from the cruelty of their fellow classmates or are subjected to racist slogans **and** expletives from hyper-patriotic Greeks.

Those compatriots of ours who are so hyper-sensitive to political correctness, however, are not bothered about such things. They consider them normal, if not necessary. They scoff at the "obsessiveness" of



Rights groups take part in a 'walk against racism' in downtown Athens in this 2018 file photo.

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the "progressives" **and** "social justice warriors" who made such a fuss over the publication of a list of "foreign" kids' names. They pen public letters about the dangers to the nation if LGBTIQI get the same rights as other citizens. They don't have a problem with the fact that some hyper-nationalists that belong to the mainstream majority revile **and** despise minority groups **and** weaker members of our society, but with the fact that certain "obsessive social justice warriors" are calling these people out.

Sure, a lot of extreme **and** crazy things have been done in the name of political correctness. From knocking historical figures off their literal **and** figurative pedestals, like Thomas Jefferson because he owned slaves,

to the censoring of Classical works of art by the zealots of neo-puritanism. The collateral damage is huge: irreverent art **and** literature, half of Homer, Shakespeare, Monty Python **and** the Bible. Woody Allen. The theory of "structural racism" crushes individualism **and** responsibility. Treating people as "victims" or "victimizers" solely on the basis of their racial identity does away with three centuries of Enlightenment. That said, the initial core of political correctness is correct. It is a constant reminder that we live in complex **and** pluralist societies **and** must develop an acceptable public vocabulary of mutual coexistence **and** mutual respect. We must be attentive **and** sensitive to things that may hurt others, **and** mindful of the historical **and** collective memories they may carry on their shoulders.

I remember once telling an African American friend at Oxford that I found his obsession with race somewhat excessive. His response shut me up: "You don't know what it's like growing up **and** knowing that every day you'll hear some comment about the color of your skin, that you'll be subjected to body searches **and** even violence by the police on the street

because of racial profiling." Likewise, I would add, I don't know what it feels like to be a woman who needs to keep looking over her shoulder when she's walking alone at night.

Precisely because we live in liberal societies, filtering our speech **and** behavior should be a product of personal choice **and** not coercion. Our words are loaded, they carry weight **and** have consequences; they can disparage, lash **and** harm. We should be bathing our words in the font of empathy.

The "woke" among us are trying to raise a wall protecting our fellow humans who are admittedly weaker by publicly lambasting verbal violence **and** racist **and** abusive language.

A humanitarian education, empathy, mutual respect **and** simple social courtesy would have solved the issue of political correctness, without us needing its more extreme manifestations **and** dictates. It would have also spared us its neo-puritanism.

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