

Understanding "PC"

"Politically correct" or "PC" is the most popular and most misunderstood term in American culture today. The history of the term and the intellectual phenomenon it attempts to describe now bear two very separate meanings. The criticism of "PC," primarily in letters to the editor in The Campus, reflects a resistance to the antiquated meaning and goals of the phrase.

Political correctness has its roots in Marxist circles whereby any political ideology that diverged from Marxist ideology was, by comparison, "politically wrong". An intellectual and academic movement in the late 1980's generated a rebirth of the term with a reinterpretation. The phrase is historically linked to an elitist political ideal and with that in mind, its use today is, in fact, a misuse. The Marxist interpretation suggests a vision like Orwell's Thought Police in 1984 : a comparison which Newsweek drew in an article in December addressing "PC." To remove the term from its historical context is to deny the potential dangers in the concept. However, to focus on its origins is to neglect the powerful and positive political force it has become.

Advocates of political correctness strive to institutionalize a respect for people and groups that have been ignored by introducing their history and literature to the currently exclusive academic climate. Still, the academics who instigate a "PC" curriculum are not trying to replace the canonical works of the "Great Men" like Aristotle and Socrates with, for example, Hispanic-American studies. The motive of this movement in academics is to open the ends of education to embrace a wider spectrum of deserving disciplines. In the same way, "PC" beyond the classroom attempts to widen the spectrum of public and private attitudes toward groups that have been traditionally marginalized.

One reasonable fear that emerges is the fear of constriction on our constitutional right to freedom of speech. On the global scale, our nation's protection of freedom of expression is rare and a privilege. On a global scale and including our nation, respect for neglected

peoples and histories is equally rare and often seems incompatible with our freedom of speech. The narrow scope of curricula has limited access to the histories and cultural traditions of many groups and fueled the cycle of elitism.

The misuse of "PC" presents an effective conservative political weapon against social change. The misuse of the phrase victimizes the groups in need of recognition by perpetuating a conservative thought-policing that is more limiting than any current notion of political correctness.

Note:

The administration recently approved the recommendation to include a sexual orientation non-discrimination policy in the handbook. The statement will be included beginning next fall. The Campus wrote an editorial this past fall calling for this exact policy decision. We would like to commend the administration for having the vision to recognize the importance of a policy that does not discriminate according to sexual orientation.

The inclusion of this statement in a previously existing and working policy indicates Middlebury's move toward becoming a more appealing academic institution to students of diversity and recognizes the need to be explicitly inclusive of all prospective students.