



Queering Political Correctness

By Jo Trigilio

I am tired of the petty squabbles of the left: that word does not include me; you didn't frame that exactly right; that term was totally PC yesterday but today it insults me; bla bla, wah wah. [Given the political situation], we need to SHOW UP first, educate 'on the job', be open to being educated, and forgive well-intentioned allies more easily.

I wrote this social media post two weeks after the election of Donald Trump, fully expecting to receive pushback and impassioned defenses of the virtues of political correctness. Instead, I was barraged with public and private messages of thanks.

Political correctness is not about addressing intentional and blatant forms of racism, sexism, transphobia, heterosexism, etc. At its best, political correctness means being careful in the use of language, categories, and political positions so as not to insult, to offend, or to marginalize people from oppressed groups. At its worst, it decrees perfection, demands that everyone be well-versed in the latest terminology, phraseology, and political positions of each identity and affinity group. The self-appointed PC police lie in wait, as if playing a game of punch bug, militantly surveilling the landscape for missteps and blunders. People who violate the rules are 'called out' and charged with phobias and isms regardless of their intent. The end game is not educational dialogue because it is assumed that PC mandates – despite their ever-changing nature – are incontrovertible.

We all have a responsibility to continuously educate ourselves about different forms of oppression and to address oppressive

Art: Brian Nash, *So Many Sheep, So Many Sweaters* (2016)



speech and actions when we encounter them. The challenge arises when well-intentioned people unwittingly use an outdated term, or adhere to an outdated political position, or when people have not yet learned the finer points of a certain type of oppression. As such, all of us, unless we are professional diversity specialists, are potential victims of PC policing.

The most common argument against mandates of political correctness is that they constitute a form of censorship. PC policing violates freedom of speech, expression, and opinion, making it impossible to critically evaluate ideas. Although this point merits thoughtful consideration, my main concern is that PC policing hinders coalitional work and the development of solidarity within communities of resistance.

If ever there were a critical time for those on the left to learn how to work in solidarity, that day came with the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States. Faced with the Trump administration's daily assault on fundamental human rights and strategic attempts to dismantle our democracy, the left can no longer afford to be splintered into a billion little superspecific identity and interest groups, each with its own version of PC terminology and political positioning.

Building communities of resistance means that we must learn to deal with one another in our complexity. Many LGBT people experience a number of intersecting oppressions. A black lesbian, for example, experiences the intersection of race, gender, and heterosexist oppression. Identity politics fractures oppressed people by presenting a smorgasbord of specific identity groups and forcing individuals to affiliate with one. Which one should she choose? Communities of resistance allow us to focus on shared political goals, regardless of our identities. But we cannot effectively engage in intersectional organizing if we are paralyzed by the fear of saying the wrong thing.

The time has come for us to queer political correctness.

The term 'queer' originally emerged in the late 80s as a challenge to mainstream LGBT politics. Its advent was motivated by radicalism, by a desire to move away from the fragmentation of

Communities of resistance allow us to focus on shared political goals, regardless of our identities. But we cannot effectively engage in intersectional organizing if we are paralyzed by the fear of saying the wrong thing.

identity politics in order to focus on the heart of homophobic and sexist oppression: heteropatriarchy in all its cultural, social, and institutionalized forms.

In its original incarnation, queer was a call for unification against a common enemy. Queer dissolves the borders of individual identity groups by functioning as a unifying umbrella term for all those who challenge the gender and sexual norms, rules, and conventions of heterosexism. This includes bisexuals, transpeople, gender non-conforming folks, intersex individuals, radical gays and lesbians, and non-normative heterosexual allies.

To be queer is to be anti-assimilationist, to resist the traditional norms of binary gender and heterosexist sexuality, the more flamboyantly and outrageously, the better. It is associated with creative rule-breaking, fluidity, irreverence, and unapologetic visibility. It frees queers from the burden of toning themselves down or being concerned about what the neighbors think. Its watchword: "We're here, we're queer, get used to it!"

At the heart of the issue, queer is not PC. It's not queer to toe the party line. It's not queer to attack one another.

If we are to build solidarity within communities of resistance, we must queer political correctness. We cannot build solidarity by enforcing the PC mandates that arise from our own specific version of identity organizing. We cannot show up with tissue paper skin, taking insult at the slightest misstep of our allies. Real community building requires that we all show up humbly, ready to learn the perspectives of others, and be open to negotiating new terms, frameworks, and approaches together. If we are to save ourselves from the potential harms of the current administration, we need to find ways to hold hands across our differences. ●



Jo Trigilio is the Director of the Graduate Program in Gender and Cultural Studies at Simmons College. Trigilio was on the leadership team for the Boston Dyke March for 14 years, and now heads the Boston Dyke March History and Archive Project. Their current scholarship focuses on forms of nonbinary gender.