

BOOK FORUM

Political correctness: A form of anthropological “do-goodism”

Christian GIORDANO

University of Fribourg

Comment on JONATHAN FRIEDMAN, *Politicamente corretto. Il conformismo morale come regime*, edited by Piero Zanini, translation by Francesca Nicola and Piero Zanini, Milano, Meltemi, 2018, pp. 348.

In his new book *Politicamente corretto. Il conformismo morale come regime*, Jonathan Friedman once again hits the mark with his critical spirit often tinged with polemical tones. In fact, he cogently highlights the hypocrisy inherent in the ideological and political practice of what I would define as “do-goodism”, widespread in present-day anthropology as we shall see.

Jonathan Friedman aptly and strongly stresses that “political correctness” has become an ideological instrument of today’s elites. In my view, however, the term “elites” is ambiguous since it is semantically too broad, thus also too indefinite. Vilfredo Pareto had already been criticized in his days because of the concept’s lack of semantic clarity (Pareto 2006). Who are the elites? Are they the “political classes” as defined by Gaetano Mosca (Mosca 1958) or, quoting Robert Michels (Michels 1989), the political parties’ upper echelons or again the *power elites* mentioned by Charles Wright Mills (Wright Mills 1989), i.e. those who steer and monopolize parliamentary life? Could they be the upper spheres of bureaucracy controlling public administrations? Or again, those in a dominant position in the cultural and artistic spheres, i.e. those who successfully produce or manage cultural activities? Finally, to

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons © Christian Giordano

Political correctness: A form of anthropological “do-goodism”

2018 | ANUAC. VOL. 7, N° 2, DICEMBRE 2018: 235-240.

ISSN: 2239-625X – DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-3514



avoid drawing out this certainly incomplete list, we need to mention those who, rightly or not, are defined as academics, i.e. those holding university positions or active in similar institutions for scientific or humanities research.

Bearing in mind these differences, we notice that the term elite applies to persons in positions of power yet in very diverse activities and with highly dissimilar rhetorics of “political correctness”. In the framework of this brief contribution, which definitely subscribes to Jonathan Friedman’s arguments, we can hardly examine them all. Therefore, I will focus on one type of academic elites hailing from my own discipline who over the past twenty years have generated a specific form of “political correctness” that I like to call “anthropological correctness”.

With the term “anthropological correctness”, I am referring to a scientific discourse linked to a specific analytical terminology that must not upset the subjects from a socially and/or culturally different society studied during fieldwork. On the surface this may seem a sensible and commendable course of action to avoid forms of crass ethnocentrism. Thus, “anthropological correctness” first emerged also to exclude blatantly unacceptable concepts such as the one of race. In brief, at first its function was to ensure the discipline’s praiseworthy morality. At this point though, we need to put this concept in historical context and consider when it appeared and then began to spread.

Starting in the 1980s, anthropology went through a profound and beneficial process of self-criticism, widely known as the postmodern “reflexive turn”, essentially based on a deconstructive stance towards the then predominant anthropological currents of thought. Yet, notwithstanding its many positive aspects, the “reflexive turn” also generated negative consequences that have led to the still rampant fervour of “anthropological correctness” which continues to influence our discipline’s language and rhetoric.

In the aftermath of the postmodern “reflexive turn”, anthropology as a typically empirical discipline of social sciences undeniably developed a significant inclination for radical self-criticism. In fact, the detached or disenchanting, if not indeed sceptical or agnostic attitude towards societies that are unlike the one of origin of the person carrying out fieldwork has become less apparent.

In fact, in the book *Writing Culture* (Clifford, Marcus 1986), which may be regarded as the founding text of the “reflexive turn”, the two authors point up a number of fundamental flaws, i.e. capital sins of empirical research and consequently also flaws in the ethnographic description and finally and especially in anthropological theorization, both idiographic and nomothetic.

In the just mentioned book, James Clifford and George Marcus accuse the anthropological reflection of having an authoritarian approach. Indeed, even the theoretical paradigm of Clifford Geertz's interpretive anthropology falls under this category. The two authors propose a new “dialogical” and “polyphonic” theoretical paradigm that considers not only the anthropologist's voice, but also that of the “subjects” being studied, i.e. the “others” who have been viewed as “objects” for far too long.

Nothing to object, up to this point. However, the “reflexive turn” led to probably unwanted or unexpected consequences that in my opinion turned out to be negative especially in terms of the spread of “anthropological correctness”.

At present, in fact, we have to avoid embarking on research matter that may upset or even hurt the feelings of individuals or groups belonging to the societies being studied, especially if these are peripheral societies. Presenting this type of material at conferences or seminars, especially with reference to subaltern groups or socially or economically disadvantaged individuals, is viewed as “anthropologically incorrect”. This methodological oddity is noticeable in political anthropology in particular. Nowadays, in fact, a neutral or detached analysis of those phenomena that Western anthropologists deem immoral or uncivilized (such as clientelism or corruptive and Mafioso practices), or destructive (such as interethnic conflicts or family feuds and honour killings), is regarded with disapproval. This stance is now very widespread because showing one's participation or, better yet, involvement in safeguarding the “good guys down here” in societies regarded as defenceless or threatened by the social strategies of socially, economically and politically dominant classes, i.e. “the bad guys up there”, is almost mandatory.

Most of these practices that are deemed immoral from a Western, thus ethnocentric point of view, are instead attributed to the upper social strata and hegemonic political classes. In these cases, it is “anthropologically correct” to roundly voice criticisms, thus all ostensibly negative social practices are ascribed to those who can take advantage of economic and political positions of power.

Nowadays, whoever dares or continues to deal with subjects that are not “anthropologically correct” will be chastised, if not indeed discredited with specific epithets. One of the most widely employed terms to discredit someone is unquestionably “orientalist”. Whoever uses this term in a blatantly disparaging way is clearly referring to the title of the famous book *Orientalism* by Edward Said (Said 1978). It is not my intention to criticize Said's theses, which I consider absolutely praiseworthy and above all relevant, though at times a bit too unilateral, but I do believe that criticizing this term in connection with “anthropological correctness” is relevant.

To avoid the various forms of abhorred Orientalism, many of today's anthropologists tend to regard the "others" as having "our" same "spaces of experience" and "horizons of expectations", thus the same social knowledge. Consequently, one expects the same behaviour in the "others". Any display of alterity in an anthropologist is censured as the "invention of others", i.e. as a mystification conceived by those who claim to have studied diversity, namely anthropologists. These forms of anthropological correctness aim to avoid terminologies and themes that might even hypothetically hurt the others' feelings. The following is a typical example; nowadays using the term "gypsies" is practically impossible. According to the logic of "anthropological correctness", the proper term is Roma or, better yet, Rroma (with two R's) because allegedly the term "gypsy" has a negative connotation and is inherently insulting, thus socially discriminatory. Paradoxically, however, some of the Roma groups want to be called gypsies.

Objectionable social phenomena, according to the logic of "anthropological correctness" are regarded as irrelevant in those in low or marginal social positions or roles. Unlike the "good guys down here", anthropological correctness attributes all possible and imaginable abominations to the "bad guys up there". In fact, whoever holds power must perforce be a "bad guy". In the logic of this populist and do-goodery methodology, carrying out a dispassionate and unprejudiced research on the elites has become nearly impossible because it would amount to a sort of sacrilege.

We ought to add that paradoxically the dialogical and polyphonic approach proposed by Clifford and Marcus (Clifford, Marcus 1986) has generated a kind of anthropologically correct neo-paternalism that aims to contrast the moral virtues and positive forms of social solidarity of the "good guys down here" with the arrogance, abuse and arbitrariness of the "bad guys up there". Thanks to this logic, at present an anthropologist feels a specific moral pressure to highlight the positive human and social qualities of the members of the society being studied.

Given the drifts produced by "anthropological correctness", we can rightly wonder whether we might be dealing with a new anthropological fiction similar to the one of the "noble savage".

The sole difference lies in the fact that the "primitive man" has been replaced by the "immigrant", the "refugee" without documents, the "politically persecuted" and, more in general, by the "poor", the "exploited", the "marginalized", the "outcast". The "new noble savages" are precisely those who fall under these categories on the fringes of society. Personally, I wonder whether anthropology may be turning into a specific "social work" vari-

ant in quest of a hypothetical, but unachievable “good society”. Yet, anthropology cannot and must neither be the scientific crutch for “bleeding-heart” development agencies, NGOs and such like associations.

In the name of the current anthropological correctness, certain social representations and related practices that might cast doubts on the moral integrity of the so-called “powerless” as the “good guys” par excellence, have become rather deplorable in anthropology. In this context we need only mention themes that are considered disgraceful, such as representations and everyday strategies linked to mistrust in the public sphere or the frequent conflicts for status, reputation and honour. These behaviours instead are attributed, without empirical evidence, to the “bad guys up there”.

In line with “anthropological correctness”, if one wishes to be acknowledged and respected in one’s own “scientific community”, one can hardly avoid searching for unlikely relations, since they are missing, of communitarian trust, inclusion mechanisms, negotiation skills, hospitality institutions, grassroots democratic structures, social movements, civil society organizations etc. of the “good guys down here”. In any case, to avoid any charge of ethnocentrism and orientalism, current anthropology delights in researching and inventing fictional, subaltern “cosy worlds” that are despised and threatened by obscure and nefarious hegemonic powers.

Finally, we need to add that this anthropologically correct populism is strictly linked to a specific form of methodological individualism that most times results in a sort of naïve voluntarism by which men, aside from any social boundaries, act freely and build their own *Lebenswelt* to their own liking. This logically implies that social actors have the -clearly illusory- possibility of choosing among a practically infinite array of action strategies beyond the most diverse claims of social control. As such, social action is characterized by an indiscriminate “everything goes”.

Due to the above-mentioned “populism”, anthropology has lost its initial allure stemming from its ability to develop and achieve a healthy *regard éloigné* as in Lévi-Strauss or at least a realistic “interpretive approach” as in Clifford Geertz (Geertz 1973), who, I would underscore once again, drew inspiration from Max Weber’s *verstehende Soziologie* (Weber 1980).

In agreement with Jonathan Friedman, I can conclude that anthropological correctness, clearly one based on a do-goodery populism, is the social production of intellectuals and academics who rightly or not feel burdened by a guilty conscience because of their apparently higher social standing.

REFERENCES

- Clifford, James, George Marcus, eds, 1986, *Writing culture. The poetics and politics of ethnography*, Berkeley & Los Angeles, University of California Press.
- Geertz, Clifford, 1973, *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*, New York, Basic Books.
- Michels, Robert, 1989, *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie. Untersuchungen über die oligarchischen Tendenzen des Gruppenlebens*, Stuttgart, Kröner Verlag.
- Mosca, Gaetano, 1958, *La classe politica*, Bari, Laterza.
- Pareto, Vilfredo, 2006, *The rise and fall of elites: An application of theoretical sociology*, London & New York, Routledge.
- Said, Edward, 1978, *Orientalism*, New York, Pantheon.
- Weber, Max, 1980, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehenden Soziologie*, Tübingen, J.C.B Mohr, Paul Siebeck.
- Wright Mills, Charles, 2000, *The power elite*, New York & London, Oxford University Press