

BOOK FORUM

A book that is out of sync with current times

Piero VERENI

Università di Roma “Tor Vergata” / Trinity College, Rome Campus

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.

There is an interesting debate (at least in Italy) on whether the Left should adopt nationalism/souverainism as one of its principles or whether it should instead embrace cosmopolitanism/internationalism. This is a book entirely about the first issue, to the point that the Author (henceforth JF) employs what seems to be a historical oversimplification to support his view. According to JF, until recently – when a moral inversion occurred due to political correctness (PC) – the Left was solely focused on the interests of the domestic population, or common people, in a purely domestic setting while the Right was totally caught up in the international reach of its markets and its transnational ruling class. This biased historical perspective ignores the overly optimistic internationalism of the Left and the overly pessimistic isolationism of the Right, to say the least, but it is nonetheless interesting to see what JF is able to derive from such prejudicial attributions to the historical Left and Right and the “moral inversion” that subverted them.

Besides this historical bias, the basic issue with this book is that it is out of sync with current language. We no longer live in a predominantly politically correct public sphere. It is true that there may be some far-flung corners in the North where intellectuals, thinkers and politicians still believe that a

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons © Piero Vereni

A book that is out of sync with current times

2018 | ANUAC. VOL. 7, N° 2, DICEMBRE 2018: 247-253.

ISSN: 2239-625X – DOI: 10.7340/anuac2239-625X-3516



certain dose of political correctness and moral constraint should prevail in public discourse, but for the most part, politics and public arenas have gone wild in the last twenty years, and battles are now fought about reliability rather than courtesy, whatever the point of view. This very simple historical fact (that public discourse has largely moved on from political correctness) creates a sense of estrangement in the reader, who sometimes struggles to grasp references to contexts that have not existed for over two decades.

This is an astonishing essay indeed. One very interesting point is that it is (accidentally) a perfect example of that which it sets out to criticize. In order to demonstrate his view of what PC really is, JF employs exactly the same undocumented, preposterous moral dichotomies that he accuses PC of using. Although he wants to play PC basher, he uses exactly the same rhetoric and ontology as the worst PC fanatics. For instance, as an authorial strategy JF appears to be affected by the same outrage he correctly identifies in bell hooks and other champions of PC. While hooks just longs to murder «an anonymous white man», JF seems to wish exactly the same for an anonymous postcolonial, possibly coloured, dumb cosmopolitan member of the PC conspiracy. The central question revolves around social definition, namely the same question that can be asked of the shocking stance that hooks unashamedly maintains: who is the «anonymous white man» or «the elite(s)» that they refer to?

The word elite/elites appears 229 times, but is never defined. It is often connoted (national, Swedish, cultural, political, cosmopolitan, Western, new, centralized, established, rising, academic, globalized, dominant, emergent, European) yet never denoted. We grasp that the elite(s) just want to keep their status but we do not know what that status is: is it economic, symbolic or political? We are told that PC discourse is central to them keeping that status but why that should be so is not stated. The undefined presence of a mysterious elite plotting behind the scenes against the "common people" rings an ominous bell in the ears of those who have been following the transformation of political public discourse in the past twenty years or so. When researching a paranoid stance, you have to be careful not to use the same arguments as the people that you are studying.

On a more theoretical level, I find JF's theory on the relative weight of semantic and indexical categories extremely epistemologically weak. His repeated hypothesis is a very general statement: human beings communicate to talk about the world (semantics) and to locate themselves and others in that world (indexicality): «In normal situations the semantic content of communication is dominant and the indexical less marked, but in periods of

stress or in institutional situations of strong horizontal social control, the social indexical outweighs the semantic» (p. 260). Unfortunately, we are left with no clue as to what a “normal situation” could be, apart from considering “globalization” as a period of stress (associated in Sweden with a strong horizontal social control, I imagine).

A central critical point in JF’s view of PC is the connection with his previous scientific social theory. Kajsa Ekholm Friedman (KEF) and JF are famous for having questioned the vulgar idea that Globalization is a recent phenomenon, dating from the second half of the Twentieth century or, for some, from the late Nineteenth century. With KEF and JF’s work, we found out that the world has always been integrated at least at regional level and big chunks of the globe have exchanged goods, information and “culture” for centuries, long before airline deregulation in the US in the mid-1970s.

If this still holds true, and JF still believes what he published in 2008, we have a problem with his current theory of PC. According to JF, PC is rooted in multicultural ideology, and multiculturalism and multicultural policies are fiercely attacked by JF as the epitome of new and old cosmopolitan elites opposed to the “common people”, who would rather stick to their good old habits and local practises. Especially when dealing with the Swedish case study, JF pits a cosmopolitan elite (led quite oddly by Ulf Hannerz) in love with multiculturalism, with down-to-earth Swedish common people, who are represented as anxious pensioners afraid of being crushed by the elite simply because the former are annoyed by the general multi-whatever moral climate.

As an Italian with his own problems with populism and souverainism, though, I will not linger on this point. I would rather focus on the strange fact that whatever existed well before a multiculturalist ideology took off in Sweden is never debated or questioned in this book. JF confines himself to describing PC (in the form of multiculturalism) as «a drastic change in principle from a formerly culturally defined nation state». «Formerly» entails a whole century of nation building, not a natural Swedish-ness that was all of a sudden toppled by a plot hatched by a bunch of elitist cosmopolitans. If the theory of Global Systems (GS) is true, where were the pure Swedes totally ignorant of the world and desperate to maintain their traditions? Where did they start and end? And if, as in the GS theory, what was imported could be incorporated into the “cultural definition” by simply denying (or not knowing) its foreign origins, is that enough to explain the sense of horizontal solidarity among nationals? Should we not add a lot of political activity responsible for homogenizing the practises, imaginations, tongues and values

of the Nation? Why should multiculturalism be so dangerous and repellent in itself to “common people” as though they once naturally belonged to a culturally defined nation? I know very little of Scandinavia, but I know enough of Southern Europe to be sure that cultural homogeneity is not a natural condition in many, many cases and had to be produced, imposed, forged and often violently established. Why then should this «culturally defined» Nation State be taken as sacred or naturally belonging to the people, when so often the people that came out of the process were the victims of that production? If multiculturalism is functional to the new exploitation of the global masses (and I believe JF *has* a point when he states this), what about the link between national economies and national homogeneity? If we need REF and JF to understand the deep connection between new modes of deterritorialized production and cosmopolitan multiculturalist ideology, don't we still need Benedict Anderson and Ernest Gellner to explain the “history” of any national cocooning in the safe cradle of traditions? Why should the homogeneous be the standard, the benchmark of identity, and all intentional coexistence of differences be a fraud enacted by evil or stupid actors? Having worked in Greek Macedonia, that sounds like yet another attempt to impose a homogeneous model of identity where people have learnt to put aside cultural differences and focus on other unifying principles. Religion can be one, civil values may be another.

I am not denying there are a lot of problems with multicultural life in the Western world, but it is not cultural difference that necessarily creates the real problem for real people. Inequality of opportunities, ignorance and utter poverty: these are the real issues at stake.

Besides all these details, I want my point to be clear. In the representation of “ordinary” Swedes (and equally for the cosmopolitan and evil elites) there is no history, no cultural elaboration, no debate. They seem to have arrived on this planet as ready-made Swedes, only to be shattered by the evil forces of multiculturalism.

The graphic part of the book provided new input for an old project of mine, namely, to write an essay on how tables, charts and drawings have been used in social sciences to mimic the respectable formalism of harder sciences and – most of all – the visual sexiness of economics. Due to space constraints, I will not linger on the fact that in the book some figures have no textual description, no caption at all and are not numbered (p. 159), or that some curious axes feature undocumented names on the sides (what is «self-direct» and «etero-direct» in figure 3 p. 165? The State? The people? The Government?). I will focus instead on figure 8, «Hegemonic cycles».

From a purely graphic perspective, this is jaw-dropping: you have a sinusoid cycle in opposition to a co-sinusoid anti-cycle. One reads «Hegemony», the other «Homogeneity» (but we are told in the text that it should read «Hierarchy»).

There are two inexplicable points, or at least two points I could not figure out the reason for, although I worked on those pages for hours, truly.

Why are the curves represented as opposite, even though they apparently depict two dimensions in “direct” (that is “not inverse”) relation? Why is Hegemony at its zenith when Homogeneity is represented at its nadir? JF explains that «In periods of expanding hegemony the political center functions as an assimilation machine». I read this as a “direct (causal) correlation” between Hegemony and Homogeneity, if it is reasonable to take “assimilation” as a proxy for homogeneity. It is well known that the expansion of the power of the nation state as a political and economic model (from the 19th century to the first half of the Twentieth century) goes hand in hand with a strong process of internal (nation-building) and external (colonialism) homogenization at all levels, from the imposition of national languages to the standardization of more or less everything. Why are two clearly “parallel” and “directly” dependent processes represented in figure 8 as opposites? Unfortunately, we cannot rely on JF’s explanation, or at least I cannot, because this statement makes no sense to me: «The inverted curves represent the *inverse* relation between hegemonic expansion and decline and *accompanying* integration/assimilation and fragmentation/cultural identification» (p. 270 my italics). How can a curve be “inverse” and “accompanying” another curve at the same time? The Italian translators (whom I congratulate for their excellent work) had to resort to «quella [relazione] parallela» to translate “accompanying” and fell into the same trap as JF. The point is that each sinusoid curve does have an inverse relation, but “with itself” at different angles/times, and surely the curve «Hegemony» moved in time from «political integration» to «political fragmentation». This is the inverse relation. Similarly, Hegemony/Hierarchy moved across time from the national integral cultural identity to the fragmentation of multiculturalism and cosmopolitanism, but the two curves moved in a parallel sinusoid curve. Why does JF visually emphasize his mistake?

I would blame what he calls «associationism». «Associationism is based on the indexicality, or social sign value of statements, i.e. on those properties which can be used to classify statements or the subjects of statements into pre-existent categories» (p. 75). As we have already seen, JF relies on a Bourdieian model of communication as a social system of distinction. We can act, work and talk using «critical rationality» namely, «what is meant by a

statement» (this is semantics), or we can act and talk (and draw figures in our essays) «based on what that which is meant means in the wider social field» (this is associationism). There is no doubt that the figures in JF's essay look extremely elegant and very – I cannot find a better word – scientific. Two opposite curves immediately remind us of the cycles of growth and decline in economics, and their inverse relation to other curves (investments, welfare expenses, whatever makes sense to relate to productivity cycles). If you are able to draw such a figure in your essay, the wider social field categorizes the book and its author in the realm of true science. The real (rational) content of the drawing is pushed into the background while the relevant part becomes the association of the figure with the glittering world of rational-cum-scientific view.

However, as I said, there is another blind point in the drawing, besides this incomprehensible opposite curve relation, and that is the existence of “cycles” in what could be better represented as a timeline that starts in the late 18th century and ends in our time. Even though JF frequently writes about «hegemonic cycles» in global systems, there is no way to understand why a book about such a partial and time-limited phenomenon as “political correctness” should be analysed within a cyclical framework. Moreover, the emergence of PC (with its opposing cultural aspects, cosmopolitanism and indigenization) is always (from the subtitle) related to the «End of Hegemony». Hegemony of what? Of Western Politics and Economics, no doubt. Therefore, JF explains to us what happened to identities when Western hegemony began to fade away: the integrative process of states that still controlled (national and inter-national) economies has been slowly but steadily superseded by new economic centralizations that needed a newly established elite interconnected on a global level. That elite thus pushed towards multiculturalism for states and cosmopolitanism for themselves, causing a localist or indigenist reaction among “common people” that had incorporated as natural the old forms of national identity and do not want to accept the newly imposed interest and passion for diversity.

I definitely feel that this model is too simple and is missing central dimensions, but this is not the point. The point is that this is nonetheless a “historicist” explanation, not a “naturalist” one: there is a specific political-economic model, the nation state, with its own historical genesis and conformation that suffers the consequences of a worldwide reallocation of economic resources and the formation of new centralities. This historical phenomenon produces a cultural consequence, which is a shift from national (civic) to post-national forms of identities, either ethnic or cosmopolitan. The specific shape of post-national identities is still a historical issue, not a

natural one that can be explained in terms of cycles and rules. Without the historical Nation State there would have been no «cultural identity» the way JF conceives it in figure 8 as the starting point of a potentially cyclical process. National cultural identity has nothing natural about it, as historians of pre-modern-state empires and other political entities know very well. Citizens of the Roman Empire or the Most Serene Republic of Venice were not naturally endowed with the same «cultural identity» entailed in JF's model, which is national identity. That was because before the modern Nation State became the benchmark of world politics and economy, there was no shared citizenship as a complex of duties and rights packed into a common cultural frame. Instead there were other forms of collective identity (religion, kinship ties, locality, local “languages”) and the hegemonic crisis (of Rome or Venice, for instance) could not produce the same cycle of «de-culturalization» and «multi-culturalization» that is represented in figure 8.

Thus, the following question is crying out for an answer: why describe a purely historical event as though it were just a moment in a natural cycle? I cannot help finding an explanation once more in the potential association of natural cycles with natural sciences. From there, it takes very little to associate the social scientist with the “real” scientist in the lab, wearing his white coat while practicing real rational science against those magicians of the word who mesmerise the populace with empty praises for a post-national way of living together. Let us go back to crude reality, figure 8 suggests, where we have to face the natural laws of identity and power. I must admit I do not share this naturalizing view of what political and cultural identities are, as I think that anthropologists in general have a different notion of identities as historical processes. Indeed, I must have read too many “Po-Mo” authors¹ and been affected by their notion that it is historical idiosyncrasies, and not natural laws, that make up human life.

1. Post-modernist literature.