Some praxeological remarks on the so-called "political correctness", "group thinking" and related problems

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Abstract	This paper presents some reflections on the so-called "political correctness", "group thinking" and related problems in the light of praxeology, which deals, inter alia, with factors increasing or/and decreasing efficiency, efficacity of human actions/activities such as decision making.

Kilka prakseologicznych uwag o tzw. politycznej poprawności, grupowym myśleniu i pokrewnych problemach

Słowa kluczowe	prakseologia, poprawność polityczna, grupowe myślenie
Abstrakt	W artykule przedstawiono kilka refleksji na temat tzw. politycznej poprawności, grupowego myślenia i pokrewnych problemów. Prakseologia zajmuje się, między innymi, czynnikami zwiększającymi lub/i zmniejszającymi efektywność działań ludzkich, np. podejmowania decyzji.

Introduction

According to the *SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research*, "praxeology is a theory of human action or practice.... the origins of praxeology lie in the concern of Greek moral philosophers, notably Aristotle, with knowledge in the service of human betterment" (Coghlan, Brydon-Miller, 2014).

The above definition requires two remarks.

Firstly, the expression: "in the service of human betterment" suggests that praxeology does not deal with destructive actions like war etc.

Economic aspect of war(fare) was appreciated by such strategists as Sun Tzu (around 500 BC) in China, and C. von Clausewitz (18/19th century AD) in Prussia. According to Sun Tzu, "generally in war the best policy is to take a state intact; to ruin it is inferior to this" (Sun Tzu,

1963, p. 77). C. von Clausewitz emphasized the relation between "profits of war" and "military expenses" (Clausewitz, 1989). In the case of secret services (intelligence etc.), praxeology cannot be understood as being in the service of human betterment (Nouzille, 2015; Paczuszka, 2018).

Secondly, the term "praxeology" is associated with A. Espinas. According to M. Petruszewycz, "Le mot 'praxéologie' semble avoir été employé pour la premiére fois dans 'Les origines de la technologie', par A. Espinas..., *Revue Philosophique*, Août-Septembre 1890 et 1891..." (Petruszewycz, 1965, p. 11). In fact, the term "praxéologie" appears in the *Revue Philosophique de la France Et de L'Étranger* in 1890 (Les origines de la technologie) (Espinas, 1890). In 1993, praxeologie was understood as: "the study of human action and conduct" (Webster's Dictionary, 1993, p. 1782).

In 2009, G. Rydlewski understood praxeological reorientation of governance as "higher efficiency, quality, efficacy of activities and economization of principles of performing duties and evaluation" (Rydlewski, 2009, p. 134). In 2014, *Collins English Dictionary* defined "praxeology" as follows: "(Philosophy) (especially in some schools of economic theory (e.g. the Austrian school of praxeology (Mises)[1]) the deductive study of human action" (Collins, 2014).

The above definitions suggest that praxeology deals/should deal not only with positive/constructive actions (improvement, betterment, higher efficiency and effectiveness of positive/constructive actions), but also with higher effectiveness of destructive actions (for instance during a war, in particular – a hybrid war) (Szałek, 2015, 2016; Wrzosek, 2018). Some researchers regard politics as a subfield of praxeology (Apăvăloaei, 2015).

Correctness > political correctness

"Correctness" is understood by Webster's Dictionary (1993, p. 511) as (inter alia) "the quality or state of being correct", whereas "correct" is explained as "adhering or conforming to an approved or conventional standard", or "conforming to logical or proven principles or agreeing with known truth" (whatever it means[2]).

One can distinguish "scientific correctness", "religious correctness", "social correctness", "ethnic correctness", "racial correctness", "eco(logical) correctness", "intellectual correctness", "moral correctness", "political correctness" (Bard, Cerf, 1994; Bernstein, 1990). "Incorrect" (> "incorrectness") is explained as (inter alia) "failing to agree with a copy or model or with established rules" and "failing to coincide with the truth" (Webster's Dictionary, 1993, p. 1145). The question is: what and where is "the truth"? For example, which religion is the true one? Which opinions on the climate change are the true ones? Let us imagine, for instance, terror of religious correctness, or terror of political/ethnic/scientific or other illusory/false "truths". In certain cases, "correctness" may not be solely constructive (positive), but also destructive (negative).

Let us focus on "political correctness" (Cialdini, Goldstein, 2004; Cole, 2006; Feldstein, 1997; Fisch, 1994; Gilens, Murakawa, 2002; Green, 2006; Hildebrandt, 2005; Holder, 1987; Hollander,

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[1] Author's remark.
[2] Author's remark.

1994; Horgan, 2013; Levin, 2010; Livni, 2019; Loury, 1994; Moller 2016; Parekh, 2017; Rawson, 1981; Rogers, Green, Ternovski, Young, 2017; Roper, 2019; Rosenblum, Schroeder, Gino, 2019; Sparrow, 2002; Stasińska, 2005; Vis, 2018; Wilson, 1995). The term "political correctness" has a long history. According to C. Roper, "the term first appeared in Marxist – Leninist vocabulary following the Russian Revolution of 1917 ("politicheskaya prawilnost"[3]). At that time it was used to describe adherence to the policies and principles of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union..." (Roper, 2019, p. 1).

Later, as I. McLean records, "the movement for political correctness... promoted anti-sexist and anti-racist speech and behavior codes..." (McLean, 1996, p. 379).

According to E. Knowles and J. Elliot, "political correctness" is "conformity to a body of liberal or radical opinion on social matters, characterized by the advocacy of approved views and the rejection of language and behavior considered discriminatory or offensive" (Knowles, Elliot, 1997). R. Rorty understood "political correctness" as a product of civilization that reflects "a basic desire to tolerate, not persecute, those who have different faiths, beliefs, or skin color" (Rorty, 1998, pp. 81–82; Roxburg, 2002, p. 302; Dzenis, Nobre Faria, 2019, p. 2).

At present, according to C. Roper, "political correctness" is a term "used to refer to language that seems intended to give the least amount of offence, especially when describing groups identified by external markers such as race, gender, culture, or sexual orientation" (Roper, 2019). S. Dzenis and F. Nobre Faria seem to present a more general approach to the problem: "the social impact of the term justifies the choice of PC (political correctness[4]) over less impactful terms such as self-censorship (Cook, Heilman, 2012)... or conformity..." (Williams, 2016; Dzenis, Nobre Faria, 2019).

Nevertheless, in communist countries (such as Poland, Soviet Union, North Korea, China, Cambodia etc.) "political correctness" had/has a sinister meaning that does not match the above-mentioned, "western" opinions.

According to some leftist commentators (inter alia Mink, 2016) in the United States, conservatives use "political correctness" to "suppress criticism" of their ideology (Krugman, 2012). E. Livni, reviewing a paper written by M. Rosenblum, J. Schroeder and F. Gino (2019), remarks that "today, academics say it (political correctness[5]) has two components. One is connected with 'censorship' (directed at words, thoughts, actions), and the other is connected with the use of tactics that are seemingly intended to help the disadvantaged" (Livni, 2019). And he adds: "correctness does not refer to truth or falsehood but to what seems morally right during a particular period in certain circles" (Livni, 2019, p. 3). This is incompatible with the definition presented in Webster's dictionary (1993, p. 1145). E. Livni, referring to the conclusion of the paper written by M. Rosenblum et al. (2019), points out that "politically incorrect speech tends to strike listeners as sincere, indicating that the communicator's beliefs are truly held" and that "being politically correct may create an illusion that the communicator is persuadable regardless of actual persuability".

The way I see the problem is: political correctness is a multidimensional problem. For instance, let us analyze the relationship between "truth" and "political correctness".

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[3] Author's remark.
[4] Author's remark.
[5] Author's remark.

Let us distinguish 5 kinds of "truth":

1. "Truth" based on correctly interpreted facts.
2. "Truth" based on genuine but incorrectly interpreted (misunderstood) facts.
3. "Truth" based on misinformation.
4. "Truth" based on lies, fantasy (disinformation, press facts).
5. "Mixed truth" based on genuine, correctly interpreted facts, misinformation, disinformation, censorship/selection of information, press facts etc.

Consequences of political correctness based on "truths" No. 2–5 do not require any additional comment.

Group thinking

Group decision making is associated with various councils (for instance: political councils like councils of ministers), think tanks, staffs, boards of directors, brainstorming groups, etc.).

Let us use "brainstorming" as an example (Osborn, 1963). A.M. Colman defines "brainstorming" as "a method of generating ideas and solving problems through the encouragement of intensive spontaneous group discussion" (Colman, 2003, p. 101).

There are a variety of brainstorming techniques (number of participants, relation: experts – novices, time, etc.), but the main rules or principles are: withholding criticism, reaching for quantity (ideas), increasing creativity of the brainstorming group and stimulating idea generation (inter alia by reducing social inhibitions inside the group) (Osborn, 1963).

The problem with brainstorming is called "groupthink" (Aldag, Fuller, 1993; Cain, 2012; Cline, 1990; De Bono, 1999; Fuller, Aldag, 1997; Janis, 1971, 1972, 1984; Maoz, 1990; Obłój, 1994; Packer, 2009; Schafer, Crichlow, 2010; Sunstein, Hastie, 2014; 't Hart, 1990, 1997, 1998; Turner, Pratkanis, 1998; Wexler, 1995; Wilcox, 2010). A.M. Colman defines "groupthink" as "a collective pattern of defensive avoidance, characteristic of group decision making in organizations in which group members develop rationalizations supporting shared illusions of their own infallibility and invulnerability within the organization" (Colman, 2003, p. 318).

According to I. Janis, "the main principle of groupthink, which I offer in the spirit of Parkinson's Law, is this: The more amiability and esprit de corps there is among the members of a policy-making group, the greater the danger that independent critical thinking will be replaced by groupthink, which is likely to result in irrational and dehumanizing actions directed against out groups" (Janis, 1972, p. 43). I. Janis refers (inter alia) to:

a) group cohesiveness (minimizing conflict) becoming "more important than individual freedom of expression",
b) leaders "only allowing certain questions (no alternative viewpoints) to be asked", "asking for opinions of only certain people in the group",
c) avoiding raising controversial issues (Janis, 1972, p. 9).

It stands to reason that brainstorming groups infected with groupthink are/will be less effective/efficient than sound brainstorming groups. There are a number of cures against this infection. Some of them can be named "brainwriting" (e.g. Rohrbach, 1969; Van Gundy, 1984).

Let us illustrate this solution with Nominal Group technique (NGT) (Flood, 1995). According to R. Flood, NGT:

> differs from brainstorming in that the idea generation does not happen through open or even structured spoken contributions. Idea generation comes from thinking, writing down thoughts and then sharing them in the written form. This has the benefit of preventing assertive, authoritative and articulate people, or groups, dominating the floor and controlling the process. Another advantage is that ideas remain anonymous, thus avoiding peer group pressure which restrains people from making out of the ordinary contributions (Flood, 1995, p. 97).

However, R. Flood (1995, p. 97) adds: "Conversely, it (brainwriting[6]) has the disadvantage of cutting out learning and understanding that occurs during speech" (Kleist, 1985, pp. 319–324).

I. Janis devised a number of ways of preventing groupthink, such as: invitation of outside experts, independent groups dealing with the same problem, careful examination of all ideas, leaders keeping their opinions for themselves (they should not impose their opinions on the participants of brainstorming session, etc.) (Janis, 1972, pp. 209–215).

Related problems

There are a number of issues associated with "political correctness" and "groupthink". I will try to shed some additional light on these problems and tentatively identify some mechanisms behind these terms.

First of all, let us deal with "cue giving" and "cue taking". According to A. Downs, "the average citizen cannot be expert in all the fields of policy that are relevant to his decisions. Therefore, he will seek assistance from men who are experts in those fields, have the same political goals he does, and have good judgment" (Downs, 1957, p. 233; Gilens, Murakawa, 2002, p. 15). For example, M. Gilens and N. Murakawa emphasize that

> for most Americans, most political issues are complex and remote... Citizens have clear incentives to take political cues from those... experts or elites whose views are conveyed by the media. But while the incentives for elite cue taking are clear, the process and the implications are not... are elite cues effective in guiding citizens toward the political choices that a more informationally demanding process would produce? (Gilens, Murakawa, 2002, p. 15).

A. Downs regards the elite cue as "a common heuristic". However, his understanding of "heuristic" is based on psychology and sociology, and it has nothing to do with traditional heuristics used in problem solving (Szałek, 2011). According to M. Gilens and N. Murakawa, elite (for example "deep state", agents of influence) can "greatly simplify political preference formation" (Gilens, Murakawa, 2002, p. 28). They put a question: "How effective is cue based political decision making?" (Gilens, Murakawa, 2002, p. 31).

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[6]   Author's remark.

B. Vis presents rather pessimistic opinion: "political elites use the availability heuristic and possibly the representativeness one for making complex decisions under uncertainty... we still know relatively little about when political elites use which heuristic with what effect(s)" (Vis, 2018, p. 1).

Let us try to reconstruct a simplified scheme: deep state (Kościelny, 2019), cue givers, elites, real power) > political correctness (playing with the Overton Window of Political Possibilities (Szałek, 2013)), propaganda (Kula, 2005) > political fiction, mass media, agents of influence, public opinion) > cue takers > some democracy (self-censorship) > consequences/effects.

It is worth emphasizing that the above mentioned chain (deep state – consequences) concerns one state (Stasińska, 2005), whereas in reality there are around 200 states (at least 200 societies with more or less differing political correctness – on the same planet (predictable/unpredictable effects, snow ball effect, avalanche effect, good/wrong priorities of cue givers, etc.; cf the problem of internal differentiation of political correctness in those societies).

Of course, the problem of political correctness must be seen in the context of other kinds of correctness – such as "religious correctness", etc.

As for "groupthink"-like problems (in such structures as Group Bilderberg, European Parliament) one could mention here: conformity to group norms/politics, peer pressure (follow your peers!), group shift and group/team errors (riskier decisions in groups), bandwagoning (hop on!), herd behavior (inter alia: panicking). The outcome of such mechanisms can hardly be predictable (positive, negative or both).

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