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W Clark Lambert

Shreya Patel

Lawrence Charles Parish

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Editorial

Disestablishmentarianism: or Why Political Correctness is Racist, Anti-gay, Anti-transgender, Misogynist, Anti-science, and Anti-you.

“If something is too stupid to be said, it is sung instead.”

- Voltaire (1694-1778)

“Those who do not study history run the risk of repeating it.”

- George Santayana (1863-1952)

W. Clark Lambert, MD, PhD¹, Shreya Patel, BS², and Lawrence Charles Parish, MD, MD(HON)³

1. Departments of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine and of Dermatology, Rutgers-New Jersey Medical School, Newark, NJ
2. Rutgers-New Jersey Medical School, Newark, NJ
3. Department of Dermatology and Cutaneous Biology and Jefferson Center for International Dermatology, Sidney Kimmel Medical College at Thomas Jefferson University, Philadelphia, PA

Correspondence to: W. Clark Lambert, MD, PhD, Departments of Dermatology, Dermatopathology, and Pathology, Rutgers-New Jersey Medical School, Room H576 Medical Science Building, 185 South Orange Avenue, Newark, NJ 07102, USA.

Disestablishmentarianism is known to most of us as one of the longest words in the English language (before some over-eager college students, even a few doctors, invented some mostly quite silly longer ones). A few may also know it as a rather dull, perhaps equally silly facet of British history. This is a shame, because this rather bizarre movement that began in eighteenth century England, has much to teach us about modern times.

Some Definitions

Ostensibly, disestablishmentarianism refers to a movement dedicated to separation of church and state, and this definition has often served it fairly well and does so in modern times.¹ Along the way, however, the term has also denoted a quite different movement, one opposed to any established order, or even to any logical thought process, a sort of intellectual anarchism. Curiously, this alternate embodiment became easy to espouse but difficult to define, easy to express in song or even poetry but difficult or impossible to state outright. It was easy to believe in, but unable to withstand the light of day. It derived much of its power from avoiding definition, from escaping that very light of day, from never having to stand up to common sense.

This type of disestablishmentarianism led to much disruption in British history, much of it poorly understood at the time and poorly documented. The Treaty of Versailles, following the Armistice ending World War I, is but one of many examples.² Created by British and French diplomats (over the weakly expressed objections of the American delegation present), the Treaty of Versailles was drawn up with the unstated understanding that the Germans were inferior beings, responsible for all the misfortunes of WW I but capable of being suppressed by diplomatic restrictions much as are animals in cages or by harnesses. The economic penalties thus imposed, combined with severe sanctions against Germany, were so extreme that they led to massive political unrest resulting in the rise of Hitler, WW II, and the dissolution of the League of Nations,³ all springing from a universally held bias among the Allies against Germans that was never stated outright and would have never stood up to any sort of scrutiny.

The modern equivalent of this disestablishmentarianism is “Political Correctness (PC).”⁴ PC is yet another example of a poorly defined but strongly defended philosophy that would be ludicrously indefensible were it put into words in plain language, but that has not been allowed to happen. It is difficult to attack a statement that has never been made, and from this derives the strength of PC. Conversely, statements that defy PC, defensible or not, perhaps equally absurd, may also not be stated (due to PC) and so also go unchallenged and even unexamined. It may be widely believed that [African American, Jewish, Indian, Latino, Chinese, gay, transgender, female, other] people are [inferior, superior, lazier, smarter, stupider, disgusting, despicable] but, due to PC, this may never be stated – the words can never be uttered. Perversely, many actions may be taken favorable or unfavorable to various groups, on a massive scale, based on these unexamined and unchallengeable biases.

Proponents of Political Correctness

Proponents of PC imagine that it is a new phenomenon, not to be found in human history (which they do not study anyhow), but this is far from true. It is recorded in Herodotus and was a factor in Xerxes’ fateful decision to invade Greece in 480 BCE.⁵ The ancients simply thought it was too stupid to warrant much attention, to put into many words, to say; perhaps they sung

about it. As noted above, PC (by whatever name) has not infrequently led otherwise rational people to make horrible decisions with catastrophic consequences.

Much that is central to PC, particularly to its impact on modern culture, is essentially hidden from public view. A startling example is the “Implicit Association Test (IAT),” a psychologic examination often given, usually involuntarily, to police officers and other public servants as well as some corporate employees, which uses pictures and word associations to uncover “implicit” biases against various races, ethnic groups, and even obese people. The IAT was introduced, with much fanfare, in 1998 by two psychologists, Anthony Greenwald and Mahzarin Banaji, and was widely adopted into US government service by the Obama administration. Never mind that the IAT was virtually untested and has not been proven to have any validity. As scientific testing has now belatedly shown, the test is essentially worthless; however, the IAT remains as a fixture of many government institutions, both federal and local, costing many millions of tax dollars and absorbing untold hours of manhours.⁶

Many Facets of PC

The facets of PC are ever expanding in ever more creative ways, many of which have a negative impact on medicine and our personal well-being; yet again, they find their way into premier medical journals. A recent example was a contribution in *JAMA Internal Medicine* that purported to show that pharmaceutical manufacturers make false claims regarding and vastly overprice the drugs they provide.⁷ [A tenant of PC is that pharmaceutical companies are evil institutions that routinely do this.] While this may or may not be true, the report itself was badly flawed, omitting, for example research and development costs as well as the cost of developing the many drugs that never reach the market. If legislation limiting the pricing of such drugs follows, the result could essentially eliminate new research and development of pharmaceuticals, and thus shorten the lives of many or even most American citizens.⁸ The fact that this nonsense escaped the editors of the journal, who we presume are intelligent, can only be explained by their being blinded by their PC bias.

We have seen this also in the medical literature. Sometimes, terrible editorial decisions, even in prominent medical journals, have emerged from PC biases. For example, over the years we have seen a number of papers proving, sometimes using mathematical “proofs,” that doctors always cheat their patients.⁶ A critical, but almost always unstated, assumption of such papers is that doctors are completely dishonest to begin with, and invariably pursue their own best interest with complete disregard for that of their patients. The conclusion of their flawed logic, that doctors always cheat their patients, is hardly newsworthy. The same conclusions could be made of anyone who is assumed to be dishonest, but who has the confidence of the public. This

list includes bankers, lawyers, teachers, ministers/rabbis, and others. The question is how such balderdash could possibly find its way into legitimate, even prominent medical journals. The only answer that we can give is that the editors were blinded by their own PC bias against doctors, even though they may have been doctors themselves.

The indirect consequences of PC are more obtuse and it can be difficult to connect the dots. However, standing by conclusions based on PC may also be much more consequential. One possible example is the exclusion of scientific advice by the current administration in Washington in negotiating nuclear treaties with rogue states such as North Korea and Iran.⁹ These people, also, are not idiots. We suspect that their distrust of scientific advice is based on their sound analysis of their experience, in which they witnessed the distortion of such advice created by PC. Ignoring science based on PC risks the chance of technical blunder with possibility catastrophic consequences.

This march of folly goes on, and on, and on...¹⁰

Conclusions

Political correctness is everywhere, and the use of PC may have unintentional consequences; however, criticism of PC should be placed into perspective. Every person has the right to his or her own respective views. We should not be too quick to judge people who stay PC, but we only recommend a retreat from the widespread unabashed use of PC. It is important to separate fact from opinion or wishful thinking; otherwise, like people who do not study history, we may be prone to repeating it. In the words of Patrick Moynihan (1927-2003), "Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not to his own facts."

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