

Donald Trump and the politics of white male anger

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(RNS) Donald Trump's ongoing narrative about political correctness being "the big problem" in this country may help explain his surprising climb in this week's presidential polls.

Billionaire Trump does not appear to have suffered too much on the personal front for having had to live in a more "PC" America.

But his message seems to resonate with (other) aggrieved white males, which may help to explain his rising popularity as a presidential candidate.

Trump said at the Cleveland GOP presidential debate that "the big problem that this country has is being politically correct. ... I frankly don't have time for total political correctness, and to be honest with you, this country doesn't have time either. This country is in big trouble. We don't win anymore."

This was in response to Fox reporter Megyn Kelly's now-famous question about Trump's history of making disparaging remarks about women.

What that has to do with our country not winning anymore was not immediately apparent — but I will propose a theory; read on.

So what exactly does that term "political correctness" mean?

Here is a polite Google definition: "the avoidance, often considered as taken to extremes, of forms of expression or action that are perceived to exclude, marginalize, or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against."

RationalWiki will have none of such a neutral definition. Instead that site offers the following: “Political correctness or PC is a snarl word usually referring to upholding a social taboo against language or attitudes that might be considered offensive and/or stupid.”

The term became widely used beginning in the early 1990s. One major source was conservative author Dinesh D’Souza’s book “Illiberal Education,” which disparaged multiculturalism and other unwelcome developments on college campuses. He and other conservatives sounded the alarm about “thought police” demanding ideological conformity to liberal norms and values.

It was a clever adoption of Communist-related rhetoric at the end of the Cold War. Communists in places such as the USSR and China demanded rigid ideological conformity (“political correctness”); brave freethinkers challenged them; today’s liberal elites must be challenged in the same way by today’s (conservative) freethinkers. Linking the academic left to the Communist left was a brilliant ploy.

Those in the anti-PC crowd expressed their frustration in altruistic terms. They offered concern about preserving the heritage and protecting the well-being of American society and Western civilization. They didn’t want to see that culture decimated due to white liberal guilt or minority group pressure.

Those of us Euro-American white male types who were in school during the early 1990s remember what was really going on. On elite campuses, America was beginning to evolve into the gender-egalitarian, multicultural society that we are today 25 years further down the road to becoming. Any remnant of belief that this country belongs to upper-class white males was being pushed aggressively to extinction.

The belief that course programs and syllabi should reflect a diversity of voices became increasingly entrenched. Student admissions and campus life policies were altered to reflect and advance gender, ethnic, racial and eventually sexual-orientation diversity. Hiring was bringing increasing diversity to staff and faculty. Even language was changing. Gender-inclusive language became ascendant, and terms used to name various groups of people were being altered to reflect what the affected people now wanted to be called.

Reinhold Niebuhr and Martin Luther King liked to say that no one ever gives up power voluntarily, even if that power is unjust or unjustly exercised. That includes

the transition from one group in a society having total control to a situation of having to share control with others.

Exclusive white male power was being taken away, both by people from the previous margins of society and by privileged white people themselves who now agreed that changes were required. Academia became the leading edge of social change, and those who were not happy with those changes went on the counterattack.

Certainly there were times when white men experienced demeaning treatment as these changes unfolded. I remember times when I felt misunderstood and mistreated. Sometimes it seemed that those who had so often experienced subjugation took some pleasure in making white guys like me squirm.

But I started on a personal journey of change, and got excited about a genuinely egalitarian, multicultural America (and church). The pressures I first experienced in school in the 1980s and 1990s proved indispensable in nudging me along, however uncomfortable they were at the time.

The surfacing of “political correctness” as a snarl word here in 2015 reflects the continued reaction of some white males to the changes that have swept them out of an exclusive hold on cultural power.

Donald Trump’s linking of political correctness with American decline both connects with past usages of the term and gives it a powerful new focus.

Now being “anti-PC” can be about taking America back to greatness under effective (white male/“colorblind”) leadership, at last. Then we can “win” again.

For a number of reasons, I am increasingly worried about this politics of white male anger, despair and defiance. I think it explains a lot of what is most troubling about our country right now.