Chapter 39
I Correct or Canceling You:
Political Correctness and Cancel Culture on Social Media – The Case of Twitter Communication in Italy

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ABSTRACT

This contribution studies the debated terms "politically correct" and "cancel culture" on Twitter and in particular investigates the meaning that people give when they label something or someone as politically correct or indicate a case of cancel culture in the Italian context, where they are not yet widespread as they are in the USA and Britain. A textual analysis of a corpus of tweets selected through a set of hashtags was carried out to identify thematic clusters to understand features and meanings given to these expressions, along with their ways of using in the various situations and contexts. The main results show different meanings of the term, in the negative sense as a limitation of freedom of speech, and in a positive sense as the exclusion of some terms that may offend some people or groups. In this case, the meaning of a word is relative and depends on the situation and context in which it is used. Furthermore, the recourse in the discourses of cancel culture is only rhetorical; there are no actions of cancellation or boycott of someone or something.

INTRODUCTION

Politically correct[1] (PC) is a term discussed, criticized, and in some cases satirized by commentators from across the political spectrum. First appeared in Marxist-Leninist vocabulary following the Russian Revolution of 1917, it became fully part of the politics, before being used wittily by liberal politicians to refer to the extremism of some left-wing issues, then spread in the civil rights movements born in the American colleges in the second half of the twentieth century. Today, PC is used to refer to language that seems intended to avoid offense to people, especially concerning race, gender, culture, and sexual orientation (Roper, 2020).

The act of ensuring social justice is not always limited to language but often leads to a form of activism to ostracize people or to remove them from prominent positions on account of an ideological breach or for violating social norms (Norris 2020). Cancel culture, as this phenomenon is better known, has a long tradition dating back to the 1950s as a strategy to boycott influential figures from black culture civil rights movements, and it takes place on social media.

The lack of a shared vision about the PC and cancel culture, often also seen as overlapped and interchangeable terms (Ben-Porath, 2017), make them highly contested (Granath & Ullén, 2019; Bouvier & Machin, 2021). This condition calls for works that shed deeper light on their meanings and features, along with the definition of contexts where they occur. In this light, the present study contributes to enhancing the understanding of the meaning that people give when they label something or someone as politically correct or report/indicate a case of cancel culture through an analysis of their conversations on social media. To accomplish this goal, a dataset of Twitter conversations featuring the phrases "politically correct" and "cancel culture" was collected; after, a textual analysis of the tweets was performed in order to identify thematic clusters that allowed better understanding in which contexts these terms was used. Social media represent in fact the privileged space where these phenomena take place (Bouvier & Machin, 2021), in particular, Twitter plays a positive role in social justice campaigns (Bouvier, 2020).

This is an exploratory purpose but became more relevant considering that the debate in Italy is recently ongoing: if, on the one hand, the use of political correctness and cancel culture is growing, especially in the most recent news events, there have not yet been cases of cultural cancellation as well as it happened in the United States. The debate about this matter in Italy, in fact, only concerned the online disapproval for the "black face" of the TV show "Your Face Sounds Familiar" (Tale e quale show) but did not affect it that much, and, during the #MeToo campaign, the only Italian case more similar to the American cancel culture examples is that of the director Fausto Brizzi, but there was no cancellation because he started working again in the show business. In the Italian case, the opposition to "political correctness" is configured as several isolated episodes, mostly produced by single users whenever the debate is revived, rather than as a real cultural or political movement (Capozzi, 2018).

This paper is structured as follows: section two illustrates the origin and the framework of politically correct and cancel culture; section three describes the method adopted, while section four shows the results of the analysis. The last section concludes with some remarks about the undertaken work and future perspectives.

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