



Episode 843: The Roots of Political Correctness, with Angelo Codevilla

Guest: Angelo Codevilla

WOODS: I just got done telling people about your article that I just got done reading in the *Claremont Review of Books*. I'm going to link to it — about political correctness. And I don't know, you've had a number of really earth-shattering essays in terms of how they've affected the way I look at the world, and this is certainly one of them, because it makes me feel like my view of political correctness has been woefully superficial, certainly compared to what you're saying here. I'm instantly persuaded by your thesis.

But I'll say — Well, you know what, let's just dive right into it, because I do want to get into current events. We've got to talk about what happened at Berkeley with Milo Yiannopoulos because it fits perfectly into what's being said here. Let's start with having you explain where in your view the phenomenon in its fundamentals of political correctness really comes from. And it's not the United States.

CODEVILLA: No, no, this is a phenomenon that pertains to all Western progressives. Basically the fact is that progressives believe that they rightly — they have a right to rule in order to change the fundamentals of humanity. And they believe that if and when they have to take power, they will be able to really make life so much better, infinitely better for mankind. Well, the fact is that they often do gain power, and when they do gain power what results is anything but an improvement in the lives of those under them. And so then what do they do? Well, they simply pretend that in fact they have succeeded, and they demand that the rest of the world simply cede to their claim of success. And therefore, they distinguish between reality and what serves their purpose. Reality is put aside in favor of pseudo-reality, which is affirmed by sheer political force.

And the essay begins with the origins of the term political correctness. Back in the '30s, the communists would joke among themselves that the things they were saying, although they were not factually correct, were politically correct. Meaning what? Meaning that they serve the interests of the party. That which is politically correct is that which serves the interests of the party, never mind the fact that it's not reality. It's a substitution of that which serves the party instead of reality.

WOODS: All right, now let's talk about the key point about Antonio Gramsci and how he alters traditional Marxist doctrine in the place he assigns — just in the logical order of things, the way the world works, to cultural matters.

CODEVILLA: Right. Well, Antonio Gramsci, a brilliant communist realized that simply using force to force people to give lip service to the party's reality wouldn't work, because they would be constantly confronted with the difference between reality and the party, and sooner or later they would revolt. Gramsci said, No, no, look, let's attack the ideas directly. Let us counter the cultural institutions, and we will then be able to change the meaning of words, and people will then no longer even be able to think of an alternative to what we are saying and doing. It's an understanding of the power of culture, the power of words.

But there are — of course this is a nice, interesting theory, but it is not all that easy to put into practice because the temptation of progressives in power is simply to force people to model their so-called truths. Gramsci was more subtle, and he never quite explained how to seduce people into political correctness, but he certainly warned the party against being too rough because that would in fact be counterproductive. So Gramsci is a really seductive figure for the left in two ways. One, he says, Yes, yes, gain monopoly power over culture and foreclose the possibility of people thinking differently. But on the other hand, he says, Well, do it in a way that doesn't shock them.

What's happened in America, of course, is that the powers that be, the leftist powers that be have forgotten about subtlety and they've gotten drunk with their own power and they simply have taken to insulting ordinary people for not going along with their view of things. So if you refuse to say that a man who claims to be a woman is not a woman, if you refuse to say that somebody with a vagina is not a man, you are insulted and called a homophobe, etc., etc., etc., etc. Well, that doesn't work. It causes resentment and revolt, and that is of course what we are seeing.

WOODS: There's a passage along these lines at the bottom of page 38 of your article that I find chilling because it so accurately describes what's going on.

You say, "Progressive regimes demand that persons who express themselves in public (even in private) affirm any and all things that pertain to the regime's identity lest they lose access to jobs or privileges, and be exposed to the shunning or ire of regime supporters—if not treated as criminals. But even totalitarian regimes can reward or punish only a few people at a time. Tacit collaboration by millions who bite their lip is even more essential than lip service by thousands of favor seekers. Hence, to stimulate at least passive cooperation, the party strives to give the impression that 'everybody' is already on its side."

That's a devastating statement because it's definitely true. We can see that any time we turn on the news or we listen to what's coming out of Hollywood or anywhere. Any influential person, whether it's a CEO of a large corporation — I know every word that's going to come out of his mouth. I know where he stands on transgender bathrooms. I know where he stands — They don't even need to — As in the old days where the embarrassed Soviet ambassador on *Nightline* hasn't consulted the Kremlin yet, he doesn't know what his position is supposed to be, they all know what the position is supposed to be. Whatever is against bourgeois norms, they know to get right in line behind it, and that further gives everybody the impression: well, I guess everybody believes such and such. Or more importantly: I'd better keep my mouth shut.

CODEVILLA: Yeah, I'd better keep my mouth shut; otherwise, I am not part — I will be shunned by the ruling class, there are certain jobs that I cannot have, or I will be fired from the job that I do have. Certainly in — Look, I spent most of my life as a professor in some of the country's better universities — "better" — more prestigious universities [laughing]. It doesn't mean they're better. And goodness gracious, every time that I spoke the truth about things as I saw them, I was subjected to all sorts of sanctions — social ones of course, as well as professional ones. I would have to shame people in order to get a raise. Shame them how? Well, by producing more books than they did, you know? But it's getting to the point now that you don't even get a chance to compete if you stand against political correctness. You are simply branded, well, as a deplorable, as an irredeemable deplorable. Well, that's the bad news. The good news is that at a certain point people say, Well, up yours. I'll be deplorable and to hell with you.

WOODS: Let me read you one other passage, and I want to get your comment on it. This is from page 42.

You write, "[T]he point of P.C. is not and has never been merely about any of the items that it imposes, but about the imposition itself. Much less is it about creating a definable common culture or achieving some definable good. On the retail level, it is about the American ruling class's felt need to squeeze the last drops of voter participation out of the Democratic Party's habitual constituencies. On the wholesale level, it is a war on civilization waged to indulge identity politics."

Now, let me ask you in connection with that: Sam Francis was a journalist in the 1990s who developed this idea of the Middle American radicals, and people have used this idea to talk about Donald Trump. But he controversially claimed that nobody really believes in egalitarianism, even the people promoting it. They don't actually believe it. They don't live their lives that way. They don't live in a neighborhood that's diverse either racially or socioeconomically. So none of them believe in egalitarianism; they're pushing it because it strengthens the regime, because when you're trying to go after an impossible goal, well, you can summon all kinds of resources because the goal will never ever be reached.

I'm not sure I'm willing to go that far. I think some of them do believe in egalitarianism, and as a nice side effect, it also strengthens the state. What do you think about that?

CODEVILLA: Well, look, they actually believe in a whole bunch of things — not in egalitarianism. That is the one thing they don't believe in. Of all the tenets of PC, egalitarianism is the one in which they absolutely don't believe in. Look, I was in the Soviet Union and I've been in a lot of places like that, and those places are the most socially stratified places on the planet because the distinction between rulers and ruled is the greatest and the sharpest.

What you see today in the reaction of the ruling class against the 2016 election is the resentment of rulers who have been overthrown or who fear being overthrown, who say, Look, you have no right to set aside my primacy. You have no right not to listen to me. You have no right not to honor me. You have no right to be my equal or to try to be my better. No, we are the only rightful rulers and you will obey.

Now, as far as the quote that you read, let me amplify that. There is no final canon of political correctness because the whole idea is the subordination of the ruled to the rulers. And with regard to what? With regard to everything, anything that the rulers might think of at any given moment. I mean, that is why the whole transgender bathroom issue and gay marriage are so interesting, because just a couple of years ago nobody would have thought of making these any kind of litmus test for anything. They were considered just crazy.

And Black Lives Matter? What? You mean — what an obviously racist statement, that black lives matter and other lives don't matter nearly so much? Who would say something so obviously outrageous? Something that — And who would then say that saying that all lives matter is a racist statement? Huh? What? What sense does that make? Well, absolutely none, except in one sense. It makes perfect sense because somebody in the ruling class decides that this is what they want. Oh, okay. That's all that's needed, you see. And as I say in the next few paragraphs, the series of demands is endless because the desire of human beings to step on those below them is also endless. It's an addiction which becomes sharper the more you're satisfied.

WOODS: Yeah, this: "The more fault I find in thee, the holier (or, at least, the trendier) I am than thou. The worse you are, the better I am and the more power I should have over you."

CODEVILLA: That's how it works.

WOODS: That's where this is all going.

CODEVILLA: That is exactly where it is.

WOODS: Now, tell me what you think is going to happen — because what you're arguing here in this article is that the left has maybe gone too far. They thought that they could just impose themselves by brute force and intimidate everybody into silence, but there is a reaction. And when they start pulling what they just pulled at Berkeley against Milo Yiannopoulos — I don't think that's going to be the end of this. You're going to see a lot more of this. Is that going to rally the left, or is that going to have the more important effect of turning more and more people against the left?

CODEVILLA: Both. Both. This is the — The left is enjoying this. It makes them feel good. And they will continue. They will do more and more of it. Look, turning to current events, the biggest event of our time is not the 2016 election; it's the Democrats', the left's reaction to the 2016 election, which is to say that the entire thing was illegitimate. And they're doubling down on that judgment and they are going to try in every possible way to act that way and to — by doing what? By insulting ordinary Americans even more than they have in the past. Doubling down on insults, doubling down on politics waged as a full cord press, etc., etc. This in fact is making it — I would say even has made it impossible to run public life in America the way it was run up until our time.

This means, unfortunately, the end of America as we knew it and the beginning of what? Well, the beginning of, in fact, a kind of civil war. This is what they want. They

evoke, by the way, the Civil War, and say that what should have been done is that the radical Republicans should have imposed racial equality, etc., etc., progressive views on the rest of the country, on the South. But they look at – This is the important thing. They look on us as if we were defeated Confederates who have to submit to their superior wisdom and virtue. Now, you can't run a republic like that.

WOODS: More on political correctness after we hear from some smart young people who are too busy for political correctness.

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Let me ask you about one ingredient that you've talked about in another article but not, I think, in this one. And that is mass immigration, and I want to know the role that plays, because the Ben Wattenberg of the way the world works is that people of all walks of life just come together and they will all share the same commitment to universalism that white Europeans in the United States have.

But in reality, they become a series of squabbling tribes who want to divide the spoils. They have no interest whatsoever in embracing universalist views. They want to each advance their own interests, and white Americans have been totally emasculated because they feel like, Well, we don't really have interests except to be exploited by everybody else. And so it doesn't actually lead to universal harmony. It leads to – The fact that decades later we're still talking about racism and "the oppression is worse than ever," well, then, how could this ever possibly work if after all these years oppression is still as bad as it was before? So what's the role of immigration in the overall PC plan?

CODEVILLA: Look, let me tell you about immigration. I am an immigrant myself. I immigrated from Italy at age 13. Didn't know a word of English when I got here, and became American, just like millions of other immigrants who came here to be Americans. And in that sense historically, you know that the words on the Statue of Liberty, "Give me your tired, your poor, your wretched refuse" is utter nonsense, because immigrants who came to America were people who were willing to leave everything and those people are willing to work harder than anybody else, etc., etc., and they made America what it is.

But the Immigration Act of 1965 changed all of that and gave preference to third world immigrants. But if these people had been admitted in the same way that previous waves of immigrants had been admitted – that is to say brought here with a job already set and without any welfare benefits, etc., etc. – it might very well have worked out exactly the way that it had before. But you mix mass immigration with a complete loss of standards as to who the immigrants are – I remember when I came I had to show my – they looked at my report card and wanted to see that I was an above average student. My mother had a job already set in the Garment District of New York. If you had those standards still and no welfare, then it might very well have worked out very well because there are all sorts of people in Latin America who are perfectly willing to become – you know, eager to become Americans – if you sort of let them. And by the way, in a number that is assimilable.

But if you open up the gates wide open without standards and with welfare at the other end, you're going to get people who will be clients of the state. And then they will become tools of those who run the state, and that's how it has worked.

WOODS: Okay, so what about then the claim that, Well, a lot of these immigrants are socially conservative and family loving? How does the PC juggernaut exploit them if they supposedly, anyway, have views different from theirs?

CODEVILLA: Well, they make — The welfare system, of course, is all about wrecking families, not building them. And besides, all that is wanted from them is that they vote for the left. That's all. They don't necessarily have to know anything. But then of course there's the whole phenomenon of illegal immigration. And here — I live here in California, where the state government, which is strictly by, of, and for the left, issues 4 million driver's licenses to illegals, driver's licenses, which in California equal voter registration. And then they of course shepherd these folks to the polls, and so you get these enormous vote tallies for the left in California. Well, that's what's going on. I mean, this is voter fraud on a massive scale. Massive, massive, massive scale. There's 4 million voter registrations given to people who are known to be illegal.

WOODS: I want to wrap up by asking you this: what do you recommend as a strategy for hitting back? I mean, I personally think ridicule and as many YouTube videos as possible —

CODEVILLA: Oh yeah.

WOODS: — as many people see this as possible.

CODEVILLA: Ridicule is absolutely essential. That's got to happen, and simply saying, "To hell with you too," paying no attention to it — "Yes, of course, I'm a racist. Yes, yes, yes, of course —" and then going on. This is what happens when epithets are overused. They just become worthless.

But our problem is much bigger than that. The problem is that there is now a political war going on that is taking place outside of what used to be the American republican framework — republican with a small R, of course. And that is not something that can be fixed. I'm afraid we're going to have to get used to imperial politics, simply politics which have nothing to do with persuading our fellow man but simply a trial of force on all sides, getting used to this as a fact, not something that we choose — absolutely not. Much rather do things the old-fashioned American way. But that has become impossible.

WOODS: Well, that's a pretty rough conclusion [laughing].

CODEVILLA: Yes, it is. I mean, I so wish that this were not so. I mean, believe me; you say, What should we do? It would be very nice if we could say, Look, never mind what you are doing, your exceptionism. Never mind this and that. We will forebear all of that. We will forebear your ruling by decree and we will only rule by the Constitution as it was written and with all of the deferences that we have become accustomed to,

even if you don't. But we can't do that. If we do that, we simply give them the privilege of hitting without being hit in return. But that just doesn't work.

WOODS: I'm sorry I was misleading when I said we would stop with that. I've got to ask just one more quick thing. Let's suppose it were possible to geographically isolate people who hold these views. Let's say they all lived in one state.

CODEVILLA: Well, yeah —

WOODS: I don't mean we're — [laughing] I'm not saying we're going to deport — What I mean is, let's suppose it were that easy, that all the crazy people live in California and everybody else lived — So in other words, if the Calexit movement really involved a matter of, We're just going to take our toys and go home.

CODEVILLA: Yeah, yeah.

WOODS: My question is, can you imagine — because what I'm arguing is I can't imagine the left, because it survives on the idea of imposing itself on the world ever since the French Revolution, it can't secede and keep to itself. That would go against its nature.

CODEVILLA: Of course not. No, no, of course it can't. Of course it can't.

WOODS: All right, I'm glad to hear you say that. I didn't want to think I was just being unfair to them, if that's possible.

CODEVILLA: No, no, this is all about mastery.

WOODS: Yeah, I don't see how else you account for behavior like this. Well, I'm going to link people to the article we've been talking about, "The Rise of Political Correctness," which I enjoyed tremendously, your various article archives, and that book you did back in 2010 on the — what was it called? On the ruling — ?

CODEVILLA: *The Ruling Class*.

WOODS: *The Ruling Class*, gosh, yeah, we should probably be talking about that too, but I'll link to that book as well.

CODEVILLA: Yeah, that's an important book. There's an extra one that I did for *Claremont* in October, the title of which was *After the Republic*.

WOODS: That's right. I was initially planning to talk to you about both articles, and then when I looked at them in more detail I thought, no way can we cover that in one episode, so I chose this one because it seemed so timely in light of what's going on, we see in our television screens. Well, thanks so much, Professor Codevilla. Your time is much appreciated.

CODEVILLA: You are most welcome.