



Why did Trump call prayers politically correct? The coevolution of the PC notion, the authenticity ethic, and the role of the sacred in public life

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Abstract

Trump's crusade against PC played a key role in his political rhetoric and resonated well among his supporters, yet his notion of PC differed greatly in meaning from earlier uses of the term and was used to denounce a much wider range of socio-political behaviors. Based on a systematic analysis of Trump's use of this notion, I identified five main normative propositions organizing Trump's anti-PC rhetoric. Viewed together, these propositions add up to a rehabilitation of White working-class culture but also outline an emerging late-modern version of the authenticity ethic, whose power extends far beyond the working class. This ethic (as manifested in Trump's anti-PC rhetoric) transforms the role of morality and the sacred in political drama and in symbolic struggles over social worth. Rather than presenting his commitment to moral values, ideals, and allegedly-universal rules, Trump used anti-PC rhetoric to expose and criticize the symbolic self-interests of others who speak on behalf of these values, rules, and ideals to claim superiority (and thus ironically mimicked the sociological critique of symbolic violence to legitimize bigotry). Yet, the sacred is not completely banished from political drama: authenticity as a principle of worth guiding moral evaluation and argumentation is revealed as a *sacred in denial*. The case of Trump's anti-PC rhetoric thus allows theorizing the implications of the authenticity ethic for the dynamics of social struggles over recognized worth and for the role of ideals in the presentation of self in politics and beyond.

Keywords Authenticity · Donald Trump · Political correctness · Sociology of morality · The sacred · Virtue signaling

Donald Trump has loved to hate political correctness (PC). As soon as he announced his candidacy for president in 2015, Trump branded himself as a crusader against

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PC who says what others would not dare. Commentators repeatedly characterized him as the anti-PC candidate: indeed, ProQuest U.S. Newsstream database has documented no less than 45,951 news items discussing both Trump and PC in 2015–2020.¹ Trump was not simply *viewed* as not being politically correct personally, he waged war on PC, explicitly attacking it as America's biggest enemy, a tiresome waste of time, and worse, what prevents America from "getting things done" and "doing the right thing," that is, acting decisively and commonsensically against national threats such as Islamic terrorism, illegal immigration, and foreign commercial competition.² Soon Trump turned PC into a main topic in the US 2016 Republican primaries, with other candidates joining in to attack PC,³ and later in the presidential election. He continued to attack PC after being elected and into the 2020 presidential election. While the number of statements Trump made on PC may seem modest (I identified 82 statements), this recurring theme in his rhetoric gained much media attention (with utterances reported and discussed by multiple media outlets), strongly characterized his candidacy, and resonated well with his audience. According to an October 2016 Fairleigh Dickinson University poll, 68% of Americans agreed that political correctness was a "big problem" in society (Aaron, 2016). Furthermore, support of the statement "There is too much political correctness in this country" was found to be the second strongest single predictor (after Republican Party registration) for supporting Trump out of 138 factors.⁴ This does not necessarily mean that Trump's anti-PC rhetoric contributed to his victory more than other factors, but it does indicate that the cultural category PC marks a major cleavage in contemporary American politics and culture. It is crucial, then, to understand what PC actually meant in Trump's rhetoric. As demonstrated below, the answer is far from trivial, as Trump identified political correctness in unusual places.

Through systematic analysis of Trump's public statements referring to political correctness, this article reconstructs both the meaning(s) of PC in Trump's anti-PC rhetoric and the wider cultural and moral logics underlying it. Its strong resonance indicates this rhetoric was not merely an individual idiosyncrasy. Transformations in political discourse may both mirror and facilitate wider and deeper transformations in the cultural and moral repertoires available to social actors. This article identifies such a cultural transformation, the rise of a unique version of the authenticity ethic that transforms political drama in America. Studying the transforming notion of PC may thus contribute to the sociology of morality in the contemporary USA.

After short literature and methods sections, I present the main finding: five normative propositions that underly Trump's anti-PC rhetoric based on my analysis of the data. I then discuss each of these propositions and its manifestation in the data and show how they all rely in different ways on ethics of authenticity, while offering a unique late-modern interpretation of the authenticity ethic. I show how the notion

¹ During Trump's official first presidential campaign period, they averaged 893 items per month.

² These lines of arguments are documented in my data, as detailed below.

³ Most notably Ben Carson and Ted Cruz, who even accused Trump himself of bowing to PC in supporting all-gender restrooms, thus allegedly putting little girls in danger.

⁴ According to a model developed by ClearerThinking based on survey data in 2016 (Greenberg, 2016).

of PC is put to new uses, such as the critique of virtue signaling, while transforming the role of the sacred in political drama.

I pay special attention to the most surprising and puzzling statements in the data. As it often happens (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), these cases played a key role in triggering and directing this research. These cases are puzzling in two senses. First, they cannot be easily reconciled with older notions of PC. Trump seemed to see political correctness everywhere and used the term PC to criticize diverse and rather unusual objects, including evangelical prayers, NFL rule changes, cursing, nonpartisan journalism, mask-wearing, and social distancing. These objects are very different from the traditional objects of anti-PC rhetoric and calling them PC indicates that the meaning of this term has transformed (as older definitions make little sense in these new contexts). Given the rising socio-political centrality of anti-PC rhetoric, it is crucial to understand what makes some prayers or mask-wearing politically correct and what is meant by calling them PC. Importantly, the analysis of cultural ‘meaning’ is not focused on the subjective intentions of Trump as an individual, but on the intersubjective level, the ways PC may be understood based on its role in the interactional dynamics and arguments in which it is used. While transformations in the meaning of terms are not unusual, these cases are also puzzling in a second, deeper sense: as shown below, Trump’s sacrilegious rhetoric seems to deviate from key sociological assumptions about moral performance. My analysis solves this puzzle by showing that what appears to be a rejection of commitment to all sacred values, rules, and ideals actually demonstrates commitment to authenticity (or a certain interpretation thereof) as a sacred value. Whereas authenticity is part of the Western moral repertoire since the enlightenment, Trump’s version of the authenticity ethic is relatively new, especially in the political field.

After presenting the propositions separately, I discuss them together, focusing on their classed dimension (their contribution to the rehabilitation of working-class culture, in line with existing literature) but also on the unusual role of the sacred in their political performance, as they construct authenticity as a *sacred in denial*. I conclude by discussing the cultural sources of Trump’s version of the authenticity ethic and its implications for critical sociology.

Literature

Political correctness

Borrowed from Maoism in the late 1960s, the term “politically correct” was first used jokingly within American leftist circles to tease those demonstrating excessive orthodoxy, but it gained ground only much later, during the 1980s and 1990s “culture wars.” At that time, conservatives borrowed it and started to use it seriously as a rhetorical weapon against liberals while debating the politics of language and campus hegemony (Berman, 1992; Hughes, 2006, 2010; Lakoff, 2000; Messer-Davidow, 1993). The first focus was the attempts of liberal academics to bring about progressive social change through language by coining neutral neologisms to replace words they considered prejudicial, offensive, and reproducing bias and oppression against

underprivileged groups. The second focus was liberal hegemony in colleges, as evident in liberalized curricula, the critical study of inequalities, alleged liberal intellectual censorship, challenges to cultural canons, or the opening of new 'studies' departments focusing on underprivileged groups. As shown below, the second focus was hardly mentioned in Trump's public statements on PC, whereas the first one was mentioned occasionally but was not their main focus.

PC and Donald Trump

In line with the first use of the term, Trump's language and rhetorical style were often described as non-PC. This was already given some scholarly attention. Arlie Hochschild (2016) explained Trump's appeal to White Southerners by analyzing his challenging of PC language norms as an attempt to transform feeling rules. In her account, PC is a liberal attempt to regulate the emotions of conservatives and tell them how they should feel toward Blacks, immigrants, gays, and refugees, whereas Trump's rhetoric has relegitimized their negative emotions, recognizing that people who feel the way they feel can still be moral, good people.

Michèle Lamont and her collaborators similarly suggested that Trump's "authentic" non-PC style explains his appeal to the White working class and that seeming to speak truth to power allowed the heir of billions to form a symbolic alliance with working-class voters against arrogant professionals and slick professional politicians who choose their words carefully to serve their instrumental goals (Lamont et al, 2017). This makes sense since working-class Whites have long been proud of their sincere speech style and have used it as a resource in boundary work to construct themselves as better people than their middle-class bosses (Lamont, 2000).⁵

These convincing analyses demonstrate the socio-political significance of style. They remind us once again that democratic elections are not only rational struggles over public policy but also struggles over socio-cultural identity, style, meaning, dignity, legitimacy, recognition, and the relative worth of different social groups. The notion of PC was a main focus of these struggles (in the form of 'stigma contests over the moral worth of numerous collective identities': Silva, 2019) in the US 2016 presidential elections. Yet, both Lamont and Hochschild focused on Trump's own style, which was widely perceived as rejecting "PC" norms, and on the resonance of this non-PC style among working-class and far-right voters. They did not focus on Trump's explicit thematization and criticism of PC in his speeches and on the new ways he used this concept. This article starts then where they finished.

This issue has not yet been systematically studied. Finley and Esposito (2019) studied Trump's Anti-PC rhetoric but restricted themselves to the particular case of immigration policy. They treated PC not as a label (that is, as a signifier with multiple possible signifieds), but as an actual phenomenon, a set of concrete social norms, and argued that Trump rejected these norms and contrasted them with the safety of Americans and honest debate. Jason Mast (2017) similarly viewed PC as

⁵ Kreiss (2017) too pointed to the centrality of performing authenticity in the construction of Trump's legitimacy, but he analyzed authenticity as a shared civil value rather than as a classed cultural ideal.

a concrete phenomenon in his analysis of legitimacy in the 2016 elections, claiming that whereas PC actually “represents a set of discourses and strategies designed to combat and collapse historically rooted and socio-culturally entrenched hierarchical classification systems,” Trump supporters falsely viewed it as an oppressive weapon wielded against them and their liberties; and that by making this claim they used an egalitarian cultural structure to protect anti-egalitarian racist and sexist hierarchies.

In my analysis I take a different path: I do not assume (as linguistic realists would) that PC exists as an actual well-defined social phenomenon to which anti-PC rhetoric refers, but rather view PC as a pejorative *label*, a linguistic category that can be applied to diverse phenomena and practices in order to criticize and discredit them. Yet, this pragmatist view of labels as tools does not deny that pejorative labels have social *meaning(s)*: their efficacy as tools for denying legitimacy and social value is achieved by associating the objects to which they are attached with moral sins. Confusing between labels and the phenomena they are used to criticize may make it more difficult to discern polysemy or transformations in labels’ meanings and use. It may also dangerously de-historicize PC (thus, Hughes (2010) found PC in communism, Mahatma Gandhi’s renaming of the untouchables, and even Reformation England). Hence, I do not claim to know in advance what PC actually is, neither do I presume that different political camps agree on what PC signifies and disagree only on whether it is good or bad. Instead, I inductively reconstructed the meanings associated with PC in Trump’s rhetoric by analyzing his actual usage of the term in context. This analytical strategy allows for exploring how old labels are put to new uses. Since PC is a *moral category* used for moral denunciation, this reconstruction may reveal cultural transformations in the moral assumptions that grant it efficacy.

Authenticity

While philosophers trace the ethic of authenticity back to Rousseau and Herder (Taylor, 1991), authenticity is not a single idea; it has been interpreted in different ways in different fields (authenticity means different things in politics and music: Grazian, 2010) and social milieus (Grazian, 2003; Strand, 2013); and also evolved over the years. Even the imperative of being true to oneself, so central to the authenticity ethic, has transformed when views of the self shifted from a long-term project anchored in institutional roles to one consisting in impulses (Turner, 1976). Authenticity was translated into different moral imperatives, which historically co-evolved with social, economic, and institutional transformations, not only to serve them (as in the case of consumerism and the authentic choice ideal) but also to criticize them.

This was demonstrated by Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2007: 438–455), who explored the shifts between three ethics of authenticity (developed for social critique) with different imperatives: first, the imperative to sacrifice *manners* for sincerity. Then, the privileging of self-expression over compliance with cultural scripts; this second version of authenticity was developed as a critique of *massification* (439–441). In a sense, it results from the inner contradiction of urban modern mass society (identified already by Georg Simmel and later famously criticized by the Frankfurt School and the popular 1960s counterculture) that simultaneously

encourages individualization and demands conformity to objective mass culture; both mass production and bureaucratization are experienced as forces threatening the authenticity of the individual. Finally, the third imperative of spontaneity identified by Boltanski and Chiapello was the rejection of *strategic calculation and instrumentality*, which was developed to criticize the “commodification of difference,” that is, the suspicion that even our uniqueness may also be inauthentic since it may be artificially designed as a part of rational self-branding. This third notion of authenticity may be viewed as a critique of neoliberal subjectivity, as neo-liberal subjects are expected to treat their persona as an asset and their interactions as transactions and to rationally manage their presentation of self (Gershon, 2011; Wee & Brooks, 2010).

Another version was identified in contemporary lay ethic of esthetic evaluation: “the hedonistic ethic of authenticity” and its imperative to ignore socially recognized value and instead follow pleasure in aesthetic evaluation (Schwarz, 2019). As shown below, this moral rejection of public demonstration of socially recognized forms of worth plays a key role in Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric. Finally, Illouz (2017) identified another new variant of the authenticity ethic: the view of subjective emotional truth as a source of authority and its privileging over objective truth and other forms of socially-recognized objective worth. Thus, blatant lies can be legitimated for their alleged emotional authenticity. This privileging of authentic emotional expression over objective truth was used to explain Trump’s appeal and why he was viewed as authentic despite making obviously false statements (Montgomery, 2017).⁶

Data

Triggered by Trump’s use of “PC” to describe new objects, this study is aimed at reconstructing the new meanings of this label and exploring the influence of its new uses on political performance. This required a systematic analysis of Trump’s use of this term. To this aim, I constructed a dataset of 82 statements of Trump discussing PC in different media, which I then analyzed. Other politicians and media personalities followed Trump’s expansive use of PC, yet, given Trump’s political and media prominence and the key role PC played in constructing his public image, I chose to focus on Trump’s statements (while occasional references to other cases are restricted to footnotes). Similarly, whereas the propositions identified in the data also underlie Trump’s rhetoric on other issues, references to statements that do not explicitly mention PC remained outside the dataset and were only mentioned in footnotes.

To collect data, I first used ProQuest U.S. Newsstream database to search for public statements by Trump (speeches, interviews, etc.) that directly referred to PC since he initiated his campaign in 2015 and until election day November 3, 2020. I read all 237 items on the database that mentioned in their headline both Trump and

⁶ Similarly, Fieschi (2019: 53) suggested that populist leaders in general use lies to bolster their claim to authenticity, as evidence for their imperfect humanity and refusal to bow to the establishment.

PC (either the acronym or the full phrase). I found 34 statements.⁷ I then searched for (and often found) full videos of these statements (speeches or interviews) to be able to learn about their context and transcribe the full text; or (if videos were not found) for transcripts of the full speech or interview. This is important, since verbal statements are part of a political drama, and their meaning cannot be detached from the situated interaction in which they were made. A second dataset consisted of relevant campaign documents (addresses and remarks of Trump in different events, statements, and press releases). I found 10 relevant documents by searching for PC (in its different forms) in the American Presidency Project database. A third set consisted of Twitter tweets by Trump that mentioned PC (in its different forms) using Twitter's search engine, which resulted in 38 tweets. These three datasets were supported by other news items that mentioned Trump and PC only in the body text (which I sampled less systematically due to the enormous sample size). I coded the data for the kinds of objects (statements, behaviors, people, etc.) classified as PC; for the attributes Trump associated with these objects (which are possible reasons, and in some cases explicit reasons for their classification as PC), and for the arguments Trump used in denouncing PC.

My analysis is focused on the surface level of rhetoric. I was not interested in whether Trump made these statements strategically or honestly, or in whether some of them were phrased by aids and staff, because regardless of these issues, Trump's statements against PC were part of his public figure, interpreted as made by Trump, and resonated among wide audiences. My focus is then on cultural analysis at the level of public culture (Lizardo, 2017), that is, on reconstructing the meaning of PC in these statements and its embeddedness in wider cultural and moral logics of our time. I am not interested in Trump as a psychological being, but rather in sociocultural transformations evident in the rhetoric of Trump's campaign. While the list of phenomena labeled by Trump as PC may first seem eclectic, using a single term for them may possibly indicate that for him (and, we may reasonably assume, for at least some of his followers who accepted and followed this labeling) they belonged together, constituting a single cultural category which they opposed. However, I did not assume that PC has a single consistent meaning across Trump's rhetoric: people in general and Trump in particular are often inconsistent and use concepts in different ways across contexts. Instead, I identified different patterns and only then explored possible affinities between them.

Findings

Five normative propositions

For Trump, denunciation of political correctness was a key political weapon against President Barack Obama's policing, commerce, and immigration policies, against other candidates in the Republican primaries, but also against a wide and rather

⁷ Often, the same statement was reported in several news items.

surprising spectrum of phenomena. *What did Trump attack while attacking them as politically correct?*

We should be careful not to misinterpret this term, as the stability of a signifier may hide shifts in what it signifies. As the cases analyzed below indicate, a closer look at the way Trump used the term PC reveals that the PC on which he waged war differed greatly from the PC against which conservatives railed in the late 1980s and 1990s culture wars.

To answer this question, I systematically analyzed all Trump's statements on PC for the normative propositions underlying their lines of argumentation. This resulted in identifying five distinct normative propositions. Whenever Trump labeled different things, people, statements, and ways of conduct as "PC," he also criticized them for failing to live up to this moral code, for violating one or more of the following five propositions, hence this set of propositions may be safely viewed as defining PC in his rhetoric.

1. Pursuing one's selfish material interests is superior to pursuing one's symbolic interests, such as claiming moral superiority and demonstrating commitment to noble values and readiness to sacrifice for them; The latter is necessarily hypocritical, serving impression management and hence wrong;
2. The content of speech is more important than its form, tone, and style; Focusing on style and manners is only good for impression management and distracts us from calling things what they are and from doing the right thing;
3. Talk is generally futile, whereas action is good; talking comes at the expense of doing, hence the more deeds and the less talk the better;
4. Manly bravery and toughness are morally superior to prudence and rational calculations and to playing by the rules;
5. This also applies to speech: spontaneous free speech is better than excessive caution to avoid offending others;

These five propositions do not logically derive from one another, yet each of them has something in common with some of the others. Furthermore, they share more than a Wittgensteinian family resemblance: while a single linguistic label can be used in different unrelated ways without any single cultural logic uniting them, this set of propositions indicates not only a spillover of meanings between uses but also a unifying cultural logic. All five moral propositions rely in different ways on ethics of authenticity. Understanding this full spectrum is crucial in order to reconstruct the meaning of PC in Trump's rhetoric and understand its resonance.

Below I discuss the five propositions, first separately and then together, and explore their relations to the cultural ideal of authenticity. I start with the first proposition and pay it more attention since it involves the most surprising and puzzling statements that triggered this research.

First Proposition: What makes masks PC, and why must journalists be so perfect?

At a press conference on March 8, 2016, after having won the Michigan and Mississippi primaries, then-presidential candidate Donald Trump was asked by NBC News

reporter Peter Alexander: "using the A-word, the S-word, the D-word, the F-word – is that presidential? Are you embarrassed by that?" Trump first remarked that criticism of this kind actually helps his election campaign; but when Alexander added that "a lot of parents are trying to figure out how to explain some of the language they're hearing on the campaign trail," Trump did not bother defending himself from this accusation. Instead, he attacked Alexander sarcastically, saying:

"Oh, you're so politically correct, you're so beautiful. Oh, look at you. Awwwww. Awwwww. He's soooooo!... Oh, I know, you've never heard a little bad, a little off language. I know, you're so perfect. Aren't you perfect? Aren't you just a perfect young man? Give me, Give me a break. You know what? It's stuff like that that people in this country are tired of."

Trump obviously did not like the question posed to him. It is much less obvious why he called it "politically correct," as a dislike for profanity does not fall within the two traditional foci of PC mentioned above: cursing does not offend disadvantaged groups more than others. As noted by Geoffrey Hughes (2006: 348), "[c]uriously, the most common sources historically of complaint against abusive language, namely religious oaths and sexual insults, have not been the major focus of the [PC] debate" in the 1990s but rather references to ethnic groups, disabilities, etc. Why did Trump classify Alexander's comment as PC? Did he simply use it to gain the sympathy of conservatives, who, as survey data show, hated PC? Yet, what gave it credibility? Was it easier to borrow the PC label and apply it here since, like classical PC, it is an attempt to morally regulate language use? But even then, what is meant here by "PC"? We may learn more from looking more closely at this case and comparing it with other cases where Trump used this term.

This dialog is about rule-breaking. It begins with an accusation: Alexander cited a social rule that prohibits cursing and taboo words and pointed to the obvious fact that Trump has broken it systematically. The fact that people do not always follow social rules is nothing new to sociology: Goffman showed that rule-breaking is common⁸ yet bearable as long as actors keep up appearances, hiding the violation while maintaining a façade of respect for shared sacred values and social rules; and as long as they reasonably excuse themselves or reaffirm their commitment to these rules and values through remedial rituals, whenever a violation was obviously revealed to their audiences (Goffman, 1971). Goffman (1959) further claimed that the dramaturgical expectation that actors seem committed to shared sacred ideals is stronger for high-status performers, who play roles that are closer to the sacred pole of society, such as political leaders.

Yet it seems that Trump did not try to reconcile his style with moral rules or sacred ideals (at least not in any obvious way). Rather than excuse himself or engage in a remedial ritual, he derisively attacked his interviewer and his pretension to speak on behalf of society and defend its virtues and sacred values. Trump's strategy was to unmask the selfish, ulterior motives behind the apparently innocent, disinterested question. According to Trump, Alexander only asked the question to show he was

⁸ This is unavoidable since social rules and ideals often contradict one another (Martin, 2015).

a better person than Trump, one who, unlike Trump, is committed to sacred moral rules and their defense; one who, by being appalled by foul language, implies that he is hardly ever exposed to it in his fine milieu. Trump's mocking revealed the fact that making this (assumedly ingenuine) impression served Alexander's symbolic interests. Uncovering these alleged hidden motives allowed Trump to completely ignore the literal question, as it was revealed as a mere cover for something else.

"Politically correct" was then (in this case and others, as shown below) the term Trump used to characterize claims to social worth through a performance of faithfulness to moral ideals and rules. In the politics of representation, Trump and Alexander were not merely individual actors: As a populist leader, Trump claimed to represent the common people and cast Alexander as the media elite representative. In Trump's take on a familiar cultural script, Alexander is cast to perform the role of the educated elites who tell ordinary people how they should behave and feel while falsely claiming disinterestedness, whereas Trump cast himself as the child who shouts, "the emperor has no clothes." Simply put, his powerful message was, educated liberals criticize my (and my supporters') style only to feel and seem better than us, to construct themselves as "so perfect."

In this case at least, the alleged sin of PC is not merely restricting the freedom of speech but also the use of these restrictions to put others in their place and thus reproduce and justify symbolic social hierarchies, that is, as a tool of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991, 2001). Trump's anti-PC rhetoric reveals that statements that claim to serve society and its shared sacred values may be viewed as actually serving the special interests of a small elite group. This critique is highly effective since symbolic violence is only effective when it is misrecognized and treated with all due respect (Bourdieu, 1991: 153). This also makes Trump's anti-PC rhetoric especially appealing to the populist project, which vilifies elites while venerating the common people (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016), claiming to speak on behalf of the people in all senses of the word (*demos*, *plebs*, and *ethnos/natio*: Brubaker, 2017, 2019) while bringing them together and drawing an equation between the interests of the people as a political community and those of the "common or ordinary people (...) to whom recognition, respect or resources should be redistributed" (Brubaker, 2019: 49), as it challenges the educated elites' claims to represent the public interest in ways that deprive the common people of symbolic worth.

The Alexander interview was no exceptional case. In other cases discussed below, Trump's anti-PC rhetoric took a similar path, the only difference being the shared value or interest, on behalf of which alleged elite representatives have spoken (or pretended to speak): here it was respectfulness; in other cases it was equality, impartiality, or concern for public health, as in the case of Trump's public utterances on mask-wearing and social distancing during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. In all these cases, Trump avoided remedial rituals that would have reaffirmed his commitment to shared ideals,⁹ and instead attacked the demand to show deference to these

⁹ Trump also refused to seek absolution for sacrilege in other cases (Fordahl, 2021) that remained outside my dataset as they did not include explicit references to PC.

ideals as “PC” and self-interested. I wish to focus on one of these utterances, a verbal exchange that took place between Trump and another journalist, Reuters’ White House correspondent Jeff Mason, during a Rose Garden press conference in May 2020, in which Mason wore a mask:

Mason: Mr. President, two questions about a couple of things you’ve tweeted about in the last few days: Were you meaning to criticize Vice President Biden for wearing a mask yesterday? and can you explain why you’ve been tweeting about a conspiracy theory that has been proven to not be true?’

Trump: No, Biden can wear a mask, but he was standing outside, with his wife, perfect conditions, perfect weather; they are inside, they don’t wear masks, and so I thought that it was very unusual that he had one on, but I thought it was fine, I wasn’t criticizing them at all, why would I ever do a thing like that? And second question was? I couldn’t hear you...

Mason: The second...

Trump: Can you take it off? because I cannot hear you.

Mason: I’ll just speak louder, sir.

Trump: Oh, OK, ’cause you want to be politically correct, go ahead.

Mason: No, sir, I just wanna wear the mask.

Trump: Go ahead, go ahead, go ahead.

Mask-wearing has an instrumental function: it reduces the chances of contracting the virus and dramatically shrinks the chances of inadvertently infecting others. However, mask-wearing also has a *symbolic* function as a marker of solidarity. Epidemiologists have repeatedly told the public that mask-wearing protects others more than the wearer and that it is important since anyone may unknowingly be an asymptomatic carrier. Mask-wearing may thus indicate being a good and considerate person who willingly agrees to suffer some inconvenience to protect other citizens. Randall Collins (2020) rightly claimed that mask-wearing “became a social marker of joining the effort against the epidemic, along with keeping 6 feet away from other people,” and suggested that shifts in the incidence of outdoor mask-wearing are a measure for the fluctuating levels of social solidarity. Of course, like most social practices, mask-wearing was interpreted in different ways by different actors under different circumstances (for example, it could also be interpreted as a statement of trust in science, expert knowledge, or the federal government and its attempts to manage the crisis through biopolitics). But even those who did not feel that mask-wearing indeed indicates solidarity and altruism still knew that others interpret it this way, i.e., that mask-wearing could yield symbolic dividends.

On several occasions, Trump mocked Biden for always wearing a mask, even when the instrumental utility of mask-wearing was relatively small, when in “perfect conditions,” outdoors, or while “speaking 200 feet away,” as he put it in their first presidential debate. He also laughed at the large size of Biden’s mask (“biggest mask I’ve ever seen”). In other words, Trump accused Biden of wearing masks for their symbolic function rather than for their instrumental one. This symbolic gesture may be interpreted positively as setting an example, showing respect for the rules, and sending a message of solidarity, but also negatively, as a calculated, strategic attempt to gain symbolic value through impression management and present oneself

as a better person than others (one who sacrifices his convenience to protect others) without really being one (when there are no other people to protect 6 feet away). Very often, Trump used the term PC to describe such a strategic investment in symbolic capital. To mention one more case, in April 2020 Trump criticized the Air Force Academy for “being very politically correct,” since they allegedly kept extra social distancing of 10 rather than 6 feet. Regardless of the disputed factual accuracy of this allegation, it exposes virtuosic distancing (like other forms of virtuosic rule-following in other cases Trump labeled PC) as an alleged social weapon, the very opposite of the solidarity it claims to represent. This is the first sin Trump associated with PC: the first proposition denounces these forms of moral virtuosity as self-interested and immoral.

In his exchange with Mason, Trump asked the reporter (who was wearing a mask, following the White House Correspondents’ Association rules) to remove it for an instrumental reason (allegedly to allow Trump to hear him better). By doing so, he showed that just like Biden (about whom he was asked), Mason used masking for its symbolic function and privileged his symbolic interests over instrumental ones, thus presenting the media as aligned with the Democrats (wearing masks to mask their symbolic self-interest as altruism), and himself as a man of the people who allegedly put common sense above abstract rules and instrumental needs above symbolic interests such as claims to worth and social distinction.

Trump’s incriminating words “OK, ’cause you want to be politically correct, go ahead” tried to publicly uncover and ridicule the symbolic self-interest that allegedly guided Mason when he pretended to protect the rules and public health. However, his derision was directed more broadly at the hidden self-interestedness behind the everyday heroism of mask-wearing of a large part of the democratic electorate, who by demonstrating virtuosic devotion to mask-wearing made a claim to be better people than Trump’s allegedly selfish voters.

To solve the puzzle: mask-wearing and aversion to cursing can be classified as PC although they obviously do not restrict the freedom of speech to avoid prejudicial language that offends minorities, since they are viewed as motivated by the same motives of which classical PC has long been accused and as serving the same symbolic interests. As early as 1994, right-wing columnist Melanie Phillips claimed that “the main purpose” of PC is not really protecting those suffering from prejudice but rather “to demonstrate the moral purity of the expurgators, their sensitivity to the evils of prejudice and discrimination” (Hughes, 2006: 349). Both the use of inoffensive gender-neutral language and wearing face masks may be uncomfortable, and in both cases, liberals are viewed as sacrificing their comfort in order to signal their virtues and seem to be “so perfect.”

Admittedly, Trump also avoided wearing masks indoors while in the vicinity of others; preferring risk-taking over prudence and rational calculations is another, different feature of his anti-PC rhetoric discussed below; however, that was not what lay at the heart of the drama that took place at the Rose Garden press conference, but rather exposing the journalist as one who is bothered less by practical issues such as being heard or avoiding the virus, and more by his symbolic interest. PC was the term Trump chose to call out this virtue signaling.

Why are prayers so politically correct?

Trump surely criticized mask wearers for virtue signaling and for being PC, yet some readers may well claim this does not necessarily mean he called them PC *for* their virtue signaling or that PC has been redefined in terms of the pursuit of symbolic profits, as suggested above. This is indeed not the only possible interpretation. Labeling masking and social distancing as PC is surprising, as it expands the term way beyond its original meanings, yet, just like earlier uses of the term, it is a weapon of conservative Republicans against liberal Democrats who try to restrain them and restrict what they are allowed to do and say. Pew American Trends Panel surveys have repeatedly shown that masking was significantly more common among Democrats than among Republicans; and that even Republicans who did wear masks were much more likely to be skeptical about their benefits and view them as a nuisance that unjustly restricts their liberties, whereas Democrats were more concerned about being in the vicinity of unmasked others. Hana Shepherd and her colleagues found that as early as April 2020, Republicans, Trump supporters, and conservatives were less likely to perceive public health measures like mask-wearing and social distancing as effective against COVID-19 (Kramer, 2020; Shepherd et al., 2020; van Kessel & Quinn, 2020).¹⁰ While nothing about masking or social distancing is inherently liberal, these practices were symbolically identified with liberals, and attacking them as PC may simply be viewed as using an old familiar and effective battle cry of the conservative camp.

This alternative interpretation, however, cannot explain several other puzzling cases. Indeed, Trump's use of the PC label becomes more perplexing when used to criticize conservatives, including his own supporters.

In June 2016, in a meeting with evangelical Christian leaders, candidate Trump criticized the Christian prayer for all leaders as "politically correct." In 1 Timothy 2, Christians are instructed to pray for everyone in general and all "kings and those in authority" in particular. In the meeting, which was videotaped and published online by conservative pastor E. W. Jackson, Trump said: "Some of the people are saying, 'let's pray for our leaders.' I said, 'You can pray for your leaders, and I agree with that, pray for everyone. But what you really have to do is pray to get everyone out to vote for one specific person. We can't be politically correct and say we pray for all of our leaders because all of your leaders are selling Christianity down the tubes and selling evangelicals down the tubes, and it is a very bad thing that is happening.'"

Paul's letter and Christian praying practices that followed its imperative surely were not guided by an attempt to avoid offending disadvantaged groups, neither do they demonstrate progressive hegemony (in academia or anywhere else). Furthermore, the alternative interpretation fails here, as the pejorative PC is used to criticize not liberals and their practices but rather a religious practice (which is associated with conservatives in the symbolic matrix of parallel binaries organizing

¹⁰ Trump's statements and conduct surely contributed to these partisan differences but so did also older partisan differences in levels of trust in the scientific establishment and the state.

American politics). What can we learn from Trump's choice to classify it as "politically correct"?

To better understand what makes prayers politically correct, we'd rather look at another surprising object that Trump labeled PC: impartiality and fairness in the media. In a series of remarks (on Twitter, in TV interviews, and in election rallies) between December 2019 and March 2020, Trump criticized Fox News for choosing to interview his political rivals (such as former FBI Director James Comey and different Democratic politicians), repeatedly labeling their choice as PC. "Fox is trying sooo hard to be politically correct," he tweeted; "They want to be politically correct, they end up interviewing more Democrats than Republicans," he said in a North Carolina rally. Trump called this move "pathetic," and framed their decision as a bad deal, predicting (and possibly threatening Fox) that Fox will lose ratings for its policy without receiving from the Democrats a primary debate in return. In an interview with Fox News host Sean Hannity on March 5, Trump claimed that Fox is "trying to be very politically correct or fair and balanced, right, is the term. But I think they hurt themselves, if you want to know the truth."

Impartial journalism and praying for all God's creatures (including one's rivals) are ideals that may be impossible to reach but they still shape human action and judgment by offering points of reference to which people aspire and which they use to evaluate and criticize themselves and others (Alexander, 2006). Yet Trump's rhetoric presented these universalist pretensions as nothing but hypocrisy. Furthermore, inviting your political rivals to present their views on air is presented as just a bad deal, in which an actual good (precious airtime) is sacrificed for a symbolic good, a noble façade, with no real-world returns (such as ratings or political power).¹¹ Universalist pretensions thus contradict Trumps' model of "politics as business" (Karakaya & Edgell, 2022). Being "fair and balanced" may be labeled "politically correct" since it is viewed merely as a "pathetic" attempt to make oneself look better, gain symbolic profits. By labeling it this way, Trump implicitly excluded the possibility that Fox journalists could be motivated by aspirations to what philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre (2007) [1981] called "internal goods," that is, standards of excellence of their professional community of practice. Trump has consistently excluded the possibility that internal goods may be motivational, i.e. that while people surely aspire for recognition, they also want to feel that their recognition is deserved. Instead, he framed any pretense of fairness, or being unbiased as hypocrisy, a strategic lie, and used PC as a codeword to unmask its alleged hidden motives. This suspicion of any claim to objectivity stands in sharp contrast to early PC critics such as Dinesh D'Souza, who struggled to defend objectivity from the "PC" relativism of radical academics.

Christian prayers may have nothing to do with liberal hegemony but they have much to do with universalism (praying even for leaders one opposes) and with

¹¹ Trump similarly argued that sacrificing actual goods for symbolic ones is a bad deal while discussing other issues, such as foreign policy: Trump argued it was wrong to subsidize the security of America's allies in the name of symbolic interests (America's world leader status) and abstract ideals (the protection of liberty).

abstract general rules (that people are expected to follow regardless of their contingent interests), and the same applies to the ethics of professional journalism, and even to rules of decorum. In the cases discussed above (and many others in the data), Trump systematically used the PC label to both uncover the symbolic interests gained by others who apparently defer to general rules, and to defend his own refusal to follow abstract rules or show public deference to values such as the equality of all humans (dismissing as “PC” criticisms of his comment on Mexican immigrants being “rapists”), solidarity in front of the pandemic, impartiality in journalism, or human dignity (while discussing profanity or sexist comments).

Beyond the sacred and the common good?

All statements discussed above are moral evaluations: they address actions that are self-definitional across contexts and evoke strong emotional reactions (Tavory, 2011). From a French pragmatist perspective, Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric has debunked claims to worth based on multiple rival definitions of the *common good* that characterize different worlds of justification, and its radical suspicion of any claim to serve the common good seems to challenge the regime of justification itself (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006). From a Durkheim-inspired perspective, Trump criticized deference to values, rules, and ideals that are *sacred*, that is, that are viewed as separated from and opposed to the profane world of rational self-gain; that help define collectivities of those who recognize their sacredness; and that evoke strong collective emotions (such as respect; and in cases of sacrilege, whenever somebody openly fails to recognize their sacredness, rage, or disgust). No less importantly, they are sacred in the Goffmanian sense, as people constantly struggle to make an impression of their commitment to these values, rules, and ideals and engage in remedial work whenever this commitment is revealed to be far from perfect. Trump’s PC critique may be viewed then as *an attempt to transform both the status of the sacred in social life and the dramaturgical principles guiding engagement with the sacred*. But how exactly?

At first glance, it seems that Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric rejects any pretension to follow sacred ideals, any kind of moral commitment to the common good, to abstract universal rules that distinguish right from wrong and should apply regardless of one’s contingent interests.¹² Following later strands of the authenticity ethic that view adherence to moral standards as inherently inauthentic (Turner, 1976: 994) and bringing them to the political field, Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric unmasked instead the hypocrisy of claims to universality, whether they are made by conservatives (praying for everyone), liberals (the sanctity of human equality, and the consequent rejection

¹² In other contexts lying outside my data, Trump did speak on behalf of social ideals like the law and the nation in a more standard way; However, the object of this analysis is not Trump as an individual or his campaign as an event, but rather the shifting meanings of PC in his anti-PC rhetoric and its cultural logic. Plurality and internal contradictions are standard features of cultural toolkits (Swidler, 2001), and Trump is no exception.

of racism and sexism), or both (using clean language that recognizes the human dignity of all others; or respect for soldiers who sacrificed for the nation).¹³

But can it be true? Can we imagine a society with truly no sacred, without any kind of normative ideals? Or more modestly, can we imagine a moral critique that does not rely on a notion of sacred? For sociologists inspired by Durkheim this is utterly absurd: the emotional, visceral power of political claims is assumed to always lie in shared transcendent cultural ideals (Durkheim, 1995). Jeffrey Alexander (2006) claimed that “Societies are not governed by power alone and are not fueled only by the pursuit of self-interest,” as “people are oriented not only to the here and now but to the ideal, to the transcendent, to what they hope will be the everlasting” (p. 3). In struggles over public opinion in democratic societies, actors must justify their particular interests in “universalizing terms” (p. 93), and when sacred ideals seem to be threatened or polluted, when it becomes evident that universalistic ideals are institutionalized in particularistic ways, this opens a path for criticism and repair. Even without assuming transcendental concerns, political drama as a presentation of self can hardly be imagined without ideals that offer actors points of reference for their performances.

Boltanski and Thévenot (2006) would have similar doubts about ideal-free politics, although for different reasons. They claimed that once actors try to justify themselves or criticize others, they must rely on shared abstract “principles of worth”, shared (although multiple and contradictory) notions of the common good that define what is worthy, which they contrasted with “self-centered pleasure.” Indeed, Boltanski (2011) identified an inherent tension between the claim of any morality to universality and the particularity of its carriers and winners. Whereas moral categories, ideals, measures, and tests of worth always claim to be universal and disinterested, they always make some people worthier than others, since what they construct as worthy is hardly ever equally distributed in society. Consequently, Boltanski suggested that any institutionalized order is susceptible to criticism for its “symbolic violence,” for serving the interest of particular groups. Yet, for Boltanski, this critique itself, in its turn, also claims to be universalistic and disinterested (and is hence susceptible to similar accusations to those it makes): critique is impossible without a “*rise toward generality*” and a notion of the “common good.” Like sociologists, laypersons sometimes engage in “drawing attention to interests—which are revealed behind arguments aiming at disinterestedness or the common good,” but always while seeking “to devalue one form of justification *in order to enhance the value of another*” (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006: 11, emphasize added).

A closer look at Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric reveals that it actually does have its own ideals. Trump presented his authenticity and refusal to invest in maintaining a noble façade as more than an instrumental choice. In his statements, this choice is presented as having a moral dimension. In this sense, the refusal to make gestures of deference to sacred ideals may be viewed itself as a *moral imperative of*

¹³ Trump denied reports that he called fallen soldiers “losers” and “suckers,” yet while discussing PC at the 2015 Family Leadership Summit, he openly said about Senator John McCain: “he’s not a war hero! he’s a war hero ‘cause he was captured, OK? I like people that weren’t captured.”

an ethic of authenticity. The first proposition underlying Trump's PC critique suggests that these gestures are hypocritical and hence morally wrong, unlike open self-interestedness.

This moral dimension was underlined whenever Trump stressed the prices he may pay or has already paid (in business or politics) for refusing to make such gestures, for not being PC and speaking his mind, as well as his willingness to pay this price and pride for it. To give just two examples: in a meeting with North Carolina businessmen on September 23, 2015, Trump discussed the price he may have to pay for his refusal to make conventional statements expressing respect and appreciation of his rivals, another practice he criticized as PC, saying:

"So [Marco Rubio] announces he's gonna run. and they go to Jeb [Bush]. 'What do you think of Marco Rubio?' 'He's my dear dear friend, he's wonderful, he's a wonderful person, I'm so happy that he's running.' Give me a break! [pause, audience laughter] That's called 'politicians' speak.' Then they go to Marco, 'What do you think of Jeb Bush?', 'oh! He's great! he's brought me along, he's wonderf...' They hate each other, but they can't say it! They hate each other! [...] It really does bother me when I see them, and I see Jeb, and maybe that's what you want, and maybe that's the kind of people that are going to get elected, to be honest. Maybe they don't want a straight-talker."

He then summed up his position by saying, "I'm so tired of this politically correct crap." Trump ridiculed these gestures to draw symbolic boundaries between himself and career politicians.¹⁴ Admitting that this inauthentic hypocrisy may pay them implies that he is so committed to the authenticity ethic that he is ready to pay to remain authentic and will not make false statements only to come across as a gentleman. In another statement issued on July 6, 2015, Trump stressed his business losses after several firms severed business ties with him following his anti-Mexican campaign statements, elevating his anti-PC stance into a republican virtue:

"I have lost a lot during this presidential run defending the people of the United States. I have always heard that it is very hard for a successful person to run for president. Macy's, NBC, Sertay, and NASCAR have all taken the weak and very sad position of being politically correct even though they are wrong in terms of what is good for our country."

Put simply: *In Trump's rhetoric, avoiding the temptation of investment in symbolic profits and impression management is elevated to the status of a form of common good, a sacred moral imperative*. Indeed, from the perspective of this version of the authenticity ethic, not being polite to political rivals, refusing to pray for them, insisting on not wearing a mask in the open air, and even cursing are nothing short of demonstrations of moral backbone.

¹⁴ Claims to authenticity (and hence critique of others' inauthenticity) are more credible for those taking an outsider position (Hahl et al., 2018). The populist style is similarly typical of those in outsider positions (Bonikowski and Gidron 2016). As a newcomer in the political field, Trump could easily claim an outsider's position.

Based on his analysis of several Trump scandals, Fordahl (2021) rightly suggested that authenticity has achieved “a sacred quality, equal to or greater than other cultural values.” However, for Fordahl it merely meant that the content of political performance becomes less important than performing it in a convincing, that is, authentic way. My analysis goes further to suggest that authenticity is associated with positive moral contents, becoming itself a “principle of worth” (Boltanski & Thévenot, 2006) that defines social sins and merits.¹⁵ Trump’s PC critique used this authenticity ethic to denounce his political rivals for violating it; and while this usage is surely partial and biased, as is usually the case with the usage of moral ideals, the authenticity ethic itself does rise toward generality, offering an abstract moral ideal.

In my earlier studies of the authenticity ethic in the context of lay aesthetic evaluation of films, restaurants, architecture, and interior design, I have documented a growing lay suspicion that status hierarchies in aesthetic fields were arbitrary and that aesthetic choices and judgments of cultural producers and consumers that are likely to yield symbolic profits could actually derive from these ulterior social motives, being aimed at yielding symbolic profit (e.g. coming across as sophisticated and tasteful) rather than being candid spontaneous evaluations. These suspicions often resulted in taking an ethical stance that privileged “real” use-value over symbolic exchange-value (Schwarz, 2016a, 2019). Material interests are viewed as authentic, while symbolic interests are viewed as inauthentic and morally flawed. I suggested that under radical suspicion, authenticity may feel like the only form of virtue left (Schwarz, 2016a). My current analysis of Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric indicates that *this version of the authenticity ethic has transformed the political field in a similar way*.¹⁶ In Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric, disguising self-interest as noble is perceived and presented as much worse than self-interest itself.¹⁷ While openly violating publicly-endorsed norms that were perceived as imposed helped Trump claim authenticity for himself (Hahl et al., 2018), uncovering alleged hidden ulterior motives behind adherence to norms helped him construct his rivals as inauthentic. Importantly, this dynamic in which critical suspicion allows actors to publicly denounce different forms of virtuous speech and action as hypocritical and to construct authenticity as a rare sacred virtue (as Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric did) is a historically and culturally specific late-modern phenomenon.¹⁸

To conclude: Trump systematically used the notion of PC to mock the allegedly hollow pretensions of sacred ideals in general and universalism and impartiality in particular. In Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric, public deference to universal moral principles, rules, and norms of decorum are presented as mere impression management

¹⁵ While authenticity can be portrayed in terms of the inspired polity in Boltanski and Thévenot’s schema, this would be highly reductionist, missing important unique cultural particularities discussed below.

¹⁶ Political scientist Catherine Fieschi (2019) suggested that conspiracy theories similarly rely on the permanent doubt and suspicion that the striving for authenticity creates.

¹⁷ For another instantiation of this pattern in a very different context: Schwarz, 2019: 406–8.

¹⁸ What I explore here is thus not the *authenticity of performance* (as a precondition for the success of any performance: Alexander, 2004) but rather a historically-specific *performance of authenticity*.

tools. No matter which moral rules are at stake (clean language or mask-wearing, prayers or journalism), whether deference to rules is practiced by conservatives or liberals, or whether deferring to them is a good or a bad deal, it is inauthentic and hence wrong. His anti-PC discourse represents an agonistic worldview, in which struggle and unrestrained egoism are everywhere, and any statement or action inconsistent with this worldview, such as claims to follow universal moral principles, is inauthentic by definition. As Hahl et al. (2018) suggested, authenticity is evaluated with respect to a particular claim, hence Trump could label those making moral claims as inauthentic and PC while protecting himself from such accusations. Yet, Trump's attitude is revealed to be not truly a-moral: it does claim socially-recognized moral value by drawing on ethical principles of authenticity.

The first proposition offered a moral imperative that is part of a wider authenticity ethic: to avoid sacrificing material interests for symbolic interests. Other statements of Trump on PC may be less surprising, but not less important: as shown below, they associate the notion of PC with other normative propositions, which similarly draw on authenticity ethics.

Second and third propositions: ISIS is cutting Christians' heads off and Jeb cares about my tone

The second proposition develops the critique of impression management as immoral: it demands that speakers and listeners focus on the content of speech rather than its style. Focusing on style is labeled as politically correct and presented as futile and serving only impression management. The third proposition goes further, suggesting that talk is generally futile, whereas action is good. Trump condemned as PC what he took for an excessive focus on speech and its style, claiming it impedes action in two ways. First, adhering to PC norms allegedly requires investing in impression management (sounding well) time and energy that should rather be invested in action. As Trump put it in a campaign video, "to be politically correct takes too much time, it takes too much effort. We have to get things done in this country, and you never gonna get it done if we just stay politically correct." Second, political correctness allegedly prevents people from calling things what they are, thus making it harder to identify problems. For example, Trump claimed that the Obama administration was unable to fight "Islamic terrorism" and "Islamic radicalism," since it refused to use these terms.

Trump repeatedly presented the focus on form as a privilege that America cannot afford. Throughout his 2015/2016 presidential campaign, his political rivals and the media have constantly criticized his style and this aesthetic criticism gave him multiple opportunities to criticize his critics for their "PC" aestheticism. For example, in a rally in Berlin, Maryland in April 2016, Trumps said:

"My wife always says, 'Be more presidential!' It's easy to be presidential, you know, being presidential is much easier than being the way I am, takes much less energy. You know what they mean by 'being presidential,' being more 'loow-keeeey.' But we can't do that! Remember when Jeb said, 'I don't like the tone of Donald Trump.' And then Hillary said, 'I do not like his attitude.'

My attitude! So listen to this, folks: we have people, their heads are being chopped off in the Middle East, they are being drowned in steel cages in the Middle East, and they're worried about tone. Give me a break, OK? Give me a break. [audience applauds]. We're gonna be tough, we're gonna be smart, we're not gonna be so politically correct, 'cause politically correct stuff is killing us. It's killing."

In this and other similar statements, Trump presented criticism against his style as yet another indication that the "PC" media and political establishment privilege form over content and symbolic interests over material ones, even over life itself. Other right-wing populists went further, explicitly suggesting that liberal policies sacrifice concrete interests of the common people to save the symbolic interests of the elite.¹⁹ The privileging of content over style (which is itself a style) has also been associated with authenticity before Trump, especially "in American politics," where "authenticity is marked by straight talk, plain speech, and working-class cultural sensibilities" (Grazian, 2010: 192).

The second and third propositions are closely related to the first one: focusing on style allegedly sacrifices material interests and the capacity to act for the pursuit of symbolic interests. It also allegedly results in inauthentic, calculated, and cautious talk and action, which are the focus of the next two propositions.

Propositions four and five: from the culture wars to Trump

The fourth and fifth propositions condemn other alleged social obstacles impeding spontaneous speech and brave, tough, and common-sense action: excessive prudence, calculation, and adherence to rules. Looking closely at these propositions helps us understand how the early PC notion could have evolved into Trump's expansive notion.

Of the two original foci of the PC critique of the 1990s, one (liberal hegemony in colleges) was nearly absent from the data.²⁰ The second focus, attempts of liberals to ban or replace certain words they considered offensive or prejudicial to disadvantaged groups, was more common: Trump defended the term "anchor babies"

¹⁹ For example, shortly after the November 2015 Paris terror attacks, Fox News anchor Tucker Carlson suggested that Democrats' support of liberal immigration policies is motivated by their desire "to feel virtuous. This kind of things makes the elite feel virtuous," while letting others pay the price, as "their kids don't go to public schools, they don't get their healthcare from emergency rooms, they have no contact with the people they are importing to this country," yet "they stand up and say 'the statue of liberty demands that we do this, it's our moral obligation.' Really?! 'cause it doesn't affect you at all." Interestingly, this monolog was wrapped between two records of Trump, the one discussing the dangers of unvetted Muslim refugees and the other saying that "We have to be vicious. We can't be nice. We can't be politically correct."

²⁰ The only exception was a 2016 Ohio speech where Trump promised to "protect students' rights to free speech on campus" since "in the past few decades, political correctness has transformed our institutions of higher education from ones that fostered spirited debate, to a place of extreme censorship where students are silenced." Nevertheless, some Trump-supporting professors continued to interpret Trump's anti-PC stance in the old terms of campus culture (Swartz, 2020).

by insisting it was shorter than any “PC” alternative; vowed to replace the inclusive greeting “happy holidays” with the traditional “merry Christmas” (which, he bemoaned, “becomes politically correct to not use”); and criticized the 2020 “politically correct” renaming of the Washington Redskins. In these three cases of “classical” PC critique, Trump criticized attempts to reform and police language use by uprooting terms considered too offensive or exclusionary to immigrants, religious minorities, and Native Americans. He similarly accused President Obama and his administration of avoiding the term “Islamic radicalism,” thus allegedly misrepresenting terror to avoid offending Muslims; criticized the *Time Magazine* for replacing “Man of the Year” with “Person of the Year”; and joked about saying “human-kind” since “mankind” is no longer PC, in line with the early use of the term.

However, Trump extended this traditional use of PC, classifying as PC a much wider spectrum of attempts to regulate spontaneous speech (prop. 5), including anti-racist and anti-sexist speech norms and even norms of clean language. For example, after having described Mexican immigrants as rapists, Trump accused both corporations that consequently severed business ties with him and individuals who called him racist of being “PC.” He reacted similarly, when journalists confronted him with his use of profanity, whether sexist (when Megyn Kelly said in the first Republican debate, “you called women you don’t like ‘fat pigs,’ ‘dogs,’ ‘slobs,’ and ‘disgusting animals’) or not (when asked by Peter Alexander about using the “F-word” and the “S-word”). These are not exactly classical cases of PC: Trump’s characterization of Mexican immigrants was criticized not for its form and insensitive choice of words but for its clearly racist content; whereas profanity does not offend members of disadvantaged groups more than it offends the privileged. However, these cases do share something with those discussed in the previous paragraph: all of them may be interpreted as attempts to constrain spontaneous speech. In Trump’s rhetoric, the demand that we think before we speak (since in our PC culture “you watch what you say,” as Trump put it) is contrasted with an ethic of authenticity and spontaneity. While some components of the contemporary authenticity ethic have emerged recently, this reluctance to watch what you say is rooted in a long American tradition of “expressive individualism” that valued” the freedom to express oneself, against all constraints and conventions” (Bellah et al., 1985: 34).

However, once authenticity was reframed as the rejection of calculation and instrumentality (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007: 441–3), it protects one’s free expression not from external influence but from the speaker’s own interests. It privileges spontaneity of speech and action over planning, strategizing, and calculated instrumental action directed at what MacIntyre (2007) called “external goods,” such as money, status, and power. Spontaneous speech and action are often perceived as expressive rather than instrumental, reflecting the true self of the speakers rather than their attempts to choose the path of action assumed to yield the highest returns. This is most evident when speech norms are violated.²¹ Oliver Hahl and Ezra Zuckerman claimed that the more audiences are conscious of extrinsic rewards such as political power and status,

²¹ Ironically, the use of “dirty speech” in the name of authenticity was first exercised by leftists in the 1960s, within the counterculture’s “expressive revolution” (Wouters, 2007: 174).

the more they tend to doubt the motives of high-status actors such as professional politicians (Hahl, 2016; Hahl & Zuckerman, 2014). Others (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2007; Schwarz, 2016a) have historicized this claim: extrinsic motivations are only problematic when authenticity and expressive action have high moral status and when instrumentality and strategic manipulation are viewed as morally dubious, which is increasingly the case in late-modern Western societies.

In Trump's anti-PC rhetoric, spontaneity turned into a prominent moral criterion of worth. He contrasted his energetic and spontaneous style with the "boring" self-controlled and PC style of career politicians, claiming that "it takes too long" to say "babies of undocumented immigrants" and that it takes too much effort to weigh every word. He stressed all three dimensions of the authenticity ideal identified by Boltanski and Chiapello (2007): *sincerity* (speaking frankly while disregarding good manners), *individuality* (resisting pressures to conform), and *rejection of calculatedness*. He stressed the latter by repeatedly suggesting that his anti-PC position was no instrumental choice but an authentic moral position for which he was ready to sacrifice (e.g., "We have to be less politically correct (...) and you know (...) you really take beatings when you tell the truth").

"It's like a bunch of babies"

Trump classified as PC not only excessive caution to avoid offending others but excessive caution and calculatedness in general; not only standards of respectful discourse, but adherence to strict standards more generally (prop. 4). In this sense, PC means a lack of the courage and toughness required to do the right thing even when it is against the rules.

For example, Trump labeled as "politically correct" police departments for their alleged inadequate toughness against criminals and terrorists, and his own security (on three different occasions) for not being tough against demonstrators. He repeatedly compared contemporary "PC" culture with an imagined golden past of law and order: "Cops (...) had sticks in those days and they'd break up those gangs and those gang members were petrified of those guys," whereas "today it's not even politically correct to say that," he said in a talk in Chicago in 2015. On another occasion, criticizing the media coverage of police violence, Trump said: "Give me a break. We better toughen up, we better smarten up, and we better stop with this political correctness because it's driving us down the tubes." In 2016, when security escorted a demonstrator out of his Oklahoma rally, Trump said: "In the good old days, they'd rip him out of that seat so fast, but today everybody is politically correct, our country's going to hell for being politically correct (...) The police, they're afraid to move. (...) We are really becoming a frightened country." In a similar incident in St. Louis, he lamented that "part of the problem (...) is nobody wants to hurt each other anymore, right? And they're being politically correct the way they take them out, so it takes a little bit longer."

Early anti-PC rhetoric rejected attempts to avoid hurting disadvantaged groups at all costs. Here this principle is extended from talk that might hurt feelings to action that might hurt bodies. Sensitivity and considerateness are criticized as such, well beyond the original political context of language politics. Yet, the two are strongly related: hurting bodies (or even supporting it) reflects negatively on one's public moral image, as "today it's not even politically correct to say that." Trump claimed this was

incapacitating and posed a threat to the nation. After the Orlando anti-LGBT terror attack, Trump claimed that America should respond forcefully and decisively, but “the current politically correct response cripples our ability to talk and think and act clearly. If we don’t get tough,” he warned, “there will be nothing left”.

Trump’s criticism of PC as incapacitating hypersensitivity, dangerous lack of manly toughness, and excessive adherence to rules, was not restricted to the political field per se; it also applied to sports, which played a key role in his populist rhetoric (Karakaya & Edgell, 2022). In a 2015 interview, Trump voiced a concern that the NFL may “soften the game up too much,” whereas football is essentially a “violent game.” When Fox host Colin Cowherd suggested the NFL must “make every effort to make the game safe” because of “litigious reasons,” Trump responded: “don’t make it too politically – you know, what we’re doing in this country now, everything has to be... don’t make too politically correct, right?” In 2019, after the horse that finished first in the Kentucky Derby was disqualified for veering out of his lane and impeding other horses, Trump similarly criticized the disqualification as typical of “these days of political correctness”: a “rough” race on a sloppy track is not the place to stick to the rules.

Rule-following is closely associated with inauthenticity: the idea that “to behave according to a set of fixed rules” is “insincere,” even a “fraud” or a “deceit” and a growing “constraint to be unconstrained, at ease, authentic, and natural” are typical of the moral world of late-modern informalized societies (Wouters, 2007: 90–2). Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric is built on these sensibilities. Manly toughness may seem to have less to do with the ethic of authenticity,²² however, in Trump’s cultural framework the two are intimately related: in his rhetoric, toughness is required not only to risk physical harm in a “tough” or “violent game,” but also to tell it as it is, regardless of consequences, and not be offended when others do the same. In Trump’s rhetoric, caution in speech and action does not indicate maturity, sophistication, or self-control but rather immaturity and a lack of manly courage to break rules when necessary, say things directly, and face reality as it is. Thus, in a 2016 Moon, Pennsylvania rally Trump said: “Everything’s politically correct. I mean, you watch what you say. You say something a little bit off, you end up with the headlines. It’s like a bunch of babies. Like a bunch of dumb babies. And believe me, folks, the world is laughing at us.” Only in a world of hypersensitive “babies” there is a need to be cautious and “watch what you say” rather than tell the truth and speak one’s mind.

Discussion

When all five propositions are viewed together, it becomes clear that Trump has redefined PC as a pejorative for those who violated different imperatives of the authenticity ethic. Apparent affinities between propositions help hypothesize how

²² Indeed, the therapeutic notion of authenticity is sometimes portrayed as foreign to the tough culture of traditional working-class men (Illouz, 1997), although this might be changing (Silva, 2015: 127–132). However, unlike Trump’s ethic of authenticity, the therapeutic notion of authenticity is focused on reflexive introspection rather than on spontaneity and the rejection of calculation.

the meaning of “PC” might have shifted from the 1990s campuses to Trump’s populist rhetoric. For example, when people try not to offend members of disadvantaged groups, they curb their spontaneous talk (prop. 5) and may be (and often are) accused of being actually motivated not by noble values (care for disadvantaged groups) but rather by their desire to claim moral superiority (prop. 1). The original and “Trumpian” meanings of PC are not so unrelated after all. Yet, Trump relied on a unique version of the authenticity ethic. The discussion section explores this version while discussing its classed dimension; and how it transforms the role of the sacred in political performance.

White working-class masculinity and beyond

In contemporary US and other late-modern societies, authenticity is highly valued across class lines and widely used in struggles over social value, yet, it takes different forms and interpretations, some of which are typical of certain social groups (e.g. Strand, 2013). Viewed together, the propositions of Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric are revealed as highly classed, gendered, and racialized: these propositions ascribed moral worth to dispositions, styles, and moral frameworks that are strongly associated with White working-class masculinity. This might have made it seem attractive to this voter population (which was crucial for Trump’s 2016 victory: Morgan & Lee, 2018), as it could support their claims to worth and recognition by facilitating transvaluation (Wimmer, 2008). Transvaluation is a transformation of the normative hierarchy between social categories or groups through redefinition of the relative worth of cultural styles and features strongly associated with them, that is, by transforming the normative principles guiding stratification (Wimmer, 2008). This redistribution of recognition is central to the populist project (Brubaker, 2017: 363). Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric could help rehabilitate a denigrated cultural model of working-class masculinity (consisting of a style and dispositions common among working-class men and of moral frameworks they often use to evaluate themselves and others) and construct this model as a shared moral ideal. Importantly, this is definitely not an accurate portrayal of the rich, diverse, and contradictory moral landscape of actual working-class men, but rather *a cultural model* associated with this group and available to its members.

The classed cultural model valorized and transvaluated by Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric had been studied and portrayed before by multiple sociologists of working-class culture, including Paul Willis (1977), Jonathan Rieder (1985), and Michele Lamont (2000). These authors described it as organized around ideals such as sincerity and authenticity; integrity and unpretentiousness; distrust of words and suspicion that fancy talk might drain the resolve to act (Rieder, 1985) as suggested in prop. 3; and straightforwardness and spontaneity (“shooting from the hip”: Lamont, 2000: 51) in talk and action (prop. 4, 5), without subsuming talk and action to careful consideration and hence to inauthentic instrumental calculations – the very same ideal portrayed in Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric. As Lamont (2000) has shown, this ideal has been instrumental in the boundary work of working-class men vis-à-vis their middle-class bosses, allowing them to construct a sense of self-value and dignity. It

was presented as opposed to middle-class culture, which scholars and working-class interviewees alike have viewed as characterized by conflict avoidance, teamwork, refinement, and instrumentalism (e.g. Lamont, 1992, 2000). As Bourdieu (1984) has long suggested, this privileging of form over content (prop. 2) is itself a privilege, a costly disposition of the middle-class habitus that the underprivileged are less likely to develop or afford. The same also applies to the orientation toward the accumulation of symbolic capital at the expense of immediate material interests.

This model is not only classed but also gendered, associated with masculinity (and Trump's anti-PC rhetoric explicitly associated being authentic and non-PC with manly bravery and toughness: prop. 4). The symbolic identification of working-class culture with masculinity and middle-class culture with femininity is well-documented since Bourdieu (1984). The working-class model of tough masculinity has become increasingly alien to many middle-class men, who have shifted towards new masculinities as a result of structural and cultural transformations (including the rise of therapeutic culture in general and industrial psychology in particular; feminism; managerial culture; and the gradual de-gendering of the labor market: Illouz, 1997, 2008).

This working-class masculinity has eventually been stigmatized and devalued, losing both its symbolic value and its economic exchange value. It has been devalued as psychotherapeutic culture has remolded social interaction as based on emotional intelligence and highly controlled decontrol (Wouters, 2007). It has been devalued in the dating market (even among working-class women: Illouz, 1997, 2008) and, most crucially, in the labor market, as the economy has shifted toward immaterial production and manipulation of signs that require different skills and competences. It is thus the cultural style of the left-behind of contemporary global economy. The growing inaccessibility of academic education to White youths from working-class families (Graeber, 2011) has widened this recognition gap (Lamont, 2018) between the educated middle classes and the devalued and denigrated working-class people whose culture Trump seemed to offer to rehabilitate.

This was one of Trump's major sources of appeal to White working-class people ('the poorly educated' as he called them) and particularly men: transvaluation or re-valorization of their characters and ways of living (Berezin, 2017; Lamont et al, 2017). The power and resonance of Trump's anti-PC rhetoric are thus intimately related to *relational* dynamics, in which actors define themselves vis-a-vis social others. It demonstrates that political dynamics are always cultural and relational, as political positions and affiliations are symbolically associated with both cultural styles and social groups (Schwarz, 2021) and informed by struggles over their relative worth. Trump's war on PC could easily be interpreted as a moral struggle over the relative worth of different interaction styles or even different *habitus*es. Trump explicitly and strategically exploited the classed dimension of speech style. When responding to a question about his style in a 2016 CBS interview by saying "I went to Ivy League school (...) I can be the most politically correct person that you've ever interviewed. Takes too much time," he used and further bolstered the identification of political correctness with the educated elites (the speech style allegedly acquired in Ivy League universities). Claiming to have chosen straight working-class style over the PC style of Ivy League universities makes a strong claim that the posh

and the good are not the same, that is, that the high status of high-status culture derives merely from its high-status carriers, rather than from its inherent superiority (cf. Sayer, 2005). This is a strong contribution to the transvaluation struggle.

Beyond class analysis

In this sense, the appeal of Trump's anti-PC rhetoric is in line with the analysis of Lamont and her collaborators (Lamont et al, 2017). Yet, the story of Trump's anti-PC rhetoric is far from simply being a story about working-class White men's struggle for recognition; it is a story about much wider a cultural transformation in late modern ethics and political performance, for two reasons.

First, Trump's anti-PC rhetoric went much further than reflecting working-class cultural traditions. While distrust of fancy talk and preference to direct and unpolished style have long been common in the American working class (and beyond it),²³ Trump's anti-PC rhetoric was quite unusual and innovative in denouncing gestures of deference to sacred ideals and noble values as "PC," phony and self-interested performances. Historically, working-class people often tended to cope with the denigration of their lifestyles *defensively*, by *claiming respectability*, publicly demonstrating their commitment to values that are widely recognized as worthy (e.g. Kefalas, 2003; Skeggs, 1997). Trump has offered his supporters a very different, *offensive* and populist strategy: challenging the value of respectability by claiming that norms of respectability are a social weapon used by elites to claim they were "better people."

Public performances of irreverence to rules of good manners as a sign of truthfulness are not completely unprecedented. Nina Eliasoph described in her ethnography of the Buffalo country-western club how members of this particular club "shared an obligation to respect [their] real self instead of stifling it with decorum" (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003: 768): for them, a "wild," sexist and racist group style was viewed as "truthful" and hence morally desirable, contrasting them to the constricting, unfree and hypocritical "good manners" of their "churchy" neighbors (Eliasoph, 2003). Hence, they tried hard to appear as rule-breaking and irreverent to demonstrate how free and unconstrained they were, turning their aversion to rules of "good manners" into a rule itself (Eliasoph, 2003). Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) suggested that club members transformed the meaning of wildness (originally positioned in the negative side of the binary code of civil society) by associating it with truthfulness (which is positioned in its positive side).

Eliasoph's story, however, was not about classed habitus embodied at the level of individuals but rather about culture at the level of group interaction styles: she stressed club members did not demonstrate racism and sexism in backstage situations. More importantly for us, it remained a marginal bounded *idioculture* (Fine, 2012), in stark contrast to Trump's anti-PC rhetoric that used this style in *national politics*. The shock it evoked indicates how unusual it was in this context.

²³ Earlier, the ideal of "plain speech" was used to distinguish American political speech in general from elitist European and Victorian styles (Eliasoph, 2003: 275).

This strategy could only be possible in a late-modern world, in which authenticity is already accepted as an ultimate good, and in which claims to universalism, altruism, or defending the social sacred are highly vulnerable to suspicions and accusations of inauthenticity, of being mere covers for self-interest. Exempt from this radical suspicion are only conduct and statements that are so wild and unrestrained to be viewed as purely expressive, or so obviously detrimental to the actors' presentation of self to exclude strategic calculation.

Secondly, the appeal of these ideals was not restricted to the working class. Moralities usually have universal aspirations (Sayer, 2005), and while many moral positions and arguments are not equally distributed across classes (Bourdieu, 1984; De Keere, 2020), morality rarely maps neatly onto class. This also applies in this case, which is important, as working-class voters alone could not have brought Trump to the White House. Indeed, Trump's interpretation of the authenticity ideal was working-class friendly, which allowed him to forge an alliance between an allegedly authentic billionaire and working-class voters against "phony" professional politicians and their allegedly inauthentic educated middle-class voters. Indeed, Trump's anti-PC rhetoric was an attack on a speech style associated with the educated middle classes, which is calculated, prudent, rule-abiding, and guided by constant reflection about its possible desired and undesired interpretations, and which is susceptible to inauthenticity accusations, both for being calculated and unspontaneous and due to its exchange value (the symbolic value this style grants its practitioners). The suspicion that instrumental action and style choices may be inauthentic and hence morally problematic was not restricted to any particular class. Trump's anti-PC rhetoric is not only a story about symbolic struggles over the value of working-class culture or White men's backlash. While it is surely both these things, it is also a fascinating and yet untold sociological story about authenticity, the status of the sacred in late-modern society, and sociological suspicion.

Sacred in denial: the transformation of the sacred in political life

Trump's anti-PC rhetoric was more than a contingent tactical choice of a single politician: it indicates a significant transformation in the role of the sacred in interaction generally and in politics in particular, challenging what we teach sociology freshmen. Rather than hide rule violations and maintain a façade of respecting shared sacred values and respectability norms (as we might expect following Gofman and Alexander), Trump has criticized the ulterior motives of those who speak on behalf of these norms and values. Yet, we should not rush to rewrite our sociology textbooks. While apparently privileging material interests over symbolic interests and sacred values, Trump still served his symbolic interests by demonstrating his commitment to a core value of late-modern society, namely authenticity.

The symbolic dimension of social life, transcendental ideals, and in a certain sense even the sacred, have not been truly banished from the political drama in Trump's anti-PC rhetoric. Yet, the dynamics of political drama and the presentation of self have changed.

Trump's rhetoric indicates that in late-modern society, authenticity is a "principle of worth" (Boltanski & Thevénot, 2006) that guides moral evaluation and argumentation and the coordination of action. More than this, authenticity is a sacred ideal that may be used to evoke strong collective emotions, bind people together and help them draw moral boundaries against (political, cultural, and class) others, criticize them, and claim moral worth to themselves and to their cultural features and ways of life, even to denigrated ones.

And yet, it is an *unusual* sacred ideal. It claims not to constrain people by subjecting them to any external ideal but rather to liberate them and celebrate the demise of external constraint. More importantly, it is used to criticize almost any claim of faithfulness to sacred cultural ideals or sacrificing for the common good. These claims are publicly "uncovered" as mere strategic attempts to make a good impression and claim supremacy over others. When authenticity is sanctified, gestures of deference to other sacred ideals are suspected of being strategic, and hence, inauthentic and impure. Trump's version of the authenticity ethic is thus iconoclastic, insisting that "thou shalt have no other gods before me." When any claim to follow any noble ideal may be accused of inauthenticity, politicians may be protected from these accusations only by making no claims not to be motivated by extrinsic rewards (Hahl et al., 2018: 22). To put it simply: in this particular version of the authenticity ethic, *authenticity is not a sacred that demands all people to acknowledge it, at least externally, by performing public gestures of deference. Instead, the only gesture of deference it demands is avoiding public gestures of deference to other sacred values and criticizing those who make them.*²⁴

Authenticity is thus a *sacred in denial*. It proscribes public signaling of commitment to norms and ideals, yet avoiding virtue signaling and criticizing others for it turn themselves into nothing but a new late-modern form of virtue signaling, a way to claim socially recognized moral value.²⁵ This pattern is evident in late modern politics just as it is in the realm of aesthetic and cultural evaluation (Schwarz, 2016a, 2019). Denunciators like Trump are virtuosi of the authenticity ethic. When authenticity is sanctified, refusing to defer to socially recognized rules and values and readiness to pay dearly for it may be viewed as indicating a moral backbone, and as Trump's sacrilegious performances have demonstrated, its moral power may be transformed into political power.

For Goffman, virtue signaling was not a problem but a solution: while we cannot possibly be constantly and fully faithful to all the contradicting sacred ideals associated with the multiple roles we play in everyday life, we may at least make the impression that we do so, including the "impression of having ideal motives" (e.g., Goffman, 1959: 46). Social roles, standards, and ideals are collective achievements and are maintained by being publicly reaffirmed in dramaturgical performance.

²⁴ Contemporary manifestations of the authenticity ethic thus go beyond those once portrayed by Sennett, as they delegitimize not only the conventional and theatrical dimensions that Sennett found constitutive of public life (Sennett, 2002 [1977]) but *any* moral pretension other than authenticity itself.

²⁵ Hence, the critique of inauthenticity is rendered susceptible to critique of its own inauthenticity, ad infinitum.

Goffman further suggested that interactions and selves are fragile and that to prevent interactions from collapsing whenever gaps between actors and their roles become apparent, actors help one another save the show, demonstrating solidarity through tact and other “protective practices.” However, these norms are increasingly challenged, and as Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric indicates, this challenge may be remolding politics. The sacred still plays a role in political drama and the presentation of self of political actors, but the internal dynamics of political drama have transformed, partly reorganized around authenticity as a *sacred in denial*, that is, around the constant uncovering of inauthentic ulterior motives behind all claims to moral nobility, which are presented as nothing but “PC.”

Authenticity is a sacred value for Americans across the political spectrum, yet Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric was unusual in turning authenticity into a “sacred in denial” and in its consequent iconoclastic political performance. Whereas both liberals and conservatives speak on behalf of multiple sacred values, Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric offered a populist rejection of claims of faithfulness to sacred values of all kinds, and presented them as inauthentic, thus implicitly claiming faithfulness to the sacred value of authenticity. This means that contemporary American politics is not simply more polarized (as often claimed) but polarized differently: Its camps are organized not only around commitment to different values (or different interpretations of shared values) but also around different performative styles, in which the sacred plays different roles in the political drama.

Conclusion: Towards a critical cultural sociology of authenticity

Exploring transformations in the meanings and social uses of PC evident in Trump’s rhetoric uncovered a wider cultural-moral transformation in the ethic of authenticity and a consequent transformation in the role of the sacred in political drama and in symbolic struggles over social worth more generally.

As demonstrated above, the meaning of the term PC has transformed. In the late twentieth century, PC was the label conservatives used to denounce the politicization of language and knowledge by liberals. In the twenty-first century, in Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric (and beyond it), it turned into a label used to denounce public demonstrations of adherence to general rules, moral standards, and manners for their alleged hidden selfish motivation: claiming moral superiority. More generally, as the five propositions underlying it indicate, Trump’s anti-PC rhetoric suggested that paying attention to impression management by weighing words and deeds is morally wrong, both in itself (for being inauthentic and constraining spontaneity) and for its costs (as it allegedly sacrifices real interests for mere impressions).

The notion of PC coevolved with the ethic of authenticity. Late modern Americans of different political orientations and class backgrounds all recognize authenticity as a form of worth, one of multiple evaluative frameworks within their moral repertoire. However, the notion of authenticity has evolved historically since the eighteenth century (as shown in the literature review section) and keeps evolving today, as my findings show. The contemporary repertoire of *authenticities* consists of different coexisting principles that emerged at different times. Given this plurality

of authenticities, it is clear how Americans of different social classes, racial identities, and political camps may agree that authenticity is sacred, while often disagreeing about who and what is authentic.

This repertoire of authenticities includes the privileging of sincerity over rigid conventions, of individual uniqueness over conformism, of spontaneous expressivity over instrumental calculations, and also of brazen pursuit of self-interest over the demonstration of commitment to sacred values (which is viewed as merely a masked and insincere form of self-interestedness). With contemporary populism, the latter version, which had already been documented in aesthetic evaluation, was introduced to the field of politics and revolutionized it, since traditionally politics has organized around the performance of commitment to sacred values, general principles, and abstract ideals. As shown above, authenticity as a sacred in denial resulted in a unique political performance: it allowed Trump to denounce as inauthentic any performance of commitment to any other sacred value, be it conservative values, dignity, or human equality. While the imperative to be faithful to one's impulses is not new (Turner, 1976), its application to political leaders and the sweeping condemnation of their claims to adhere to general principles and ideals is surely a creature of our time.

The emergence of this new form of the authenticity ethic relies on increased suspicions in late modernity toward nearly all claims to disinterestedness or faithfulness to noble values or universal principles. Identifying the sources of this radical suspicion lies beyond the scope of this article, yet two likely sources can be mentioned: neoliberalism and critical theory. Neoliberalism encourages us to view others as egoistic and untrustworthy *homines oeconomici* (Ailon, 2020) since it assumes an agonistic social world, where *homo homini lupus*. It views both the self and social relations as assets to be rationally managed through calculated choice (Gershon, 2011).²⁶ Critical sensibilities that had developed in different strands of critical theory in the social sciences and the humanities have not remained there. The “school of suspicion,” starting with Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud (Ricoeur, 1970) and later developed by critical sociologists like Bourdieu, has widely influenced popular views of social life in general and politics in particular, sensitizing laypersons to identify hidden particularistic interests behind claims to the common good.

When Trump's anti-PC rhetoric suggests that moral virtuosity yields symbolic profits and hence may be motivated by them, and when it exposes cultural ideals and social evaluation as social weapons used to reproduce social hierarchies, claim social value, and deny it from social others – it comes disturbingly close to Bourdieu's critique of symbolic violence and his deployment of “sociology as a martial art” against it (e.g. Bourdieu, 1991). It is only ironic that PC, a term originally used to fight critical theory in liberal campuses and defend the objectivity of science, has eventually adopted core moves of critical sociology against claims to objectivity and

²⁶ Subjects often struggle to reconcile the neoliberal imperative to maximize with the imperative of the authenticity ethic to “be themselves” and express themselves spontaneously.

impartiality. It is also ironic that in the case of Trump's anti-PC rhetoric, resistance to symbolic violence results in *legitimizing* sexism and racism rather than in promoting equality as critical sociologists have hoped. This may be alarming for critical sociologists like myself, as it indicates that our analytical strategy of constantly uncovering hidden dark motives may easily be used to promote cynicism toward all social ideals, including the progressive ideal of equality that have guided our sociological project.

Thus, looking closely at Trump's PC critique and its reliance on ethics of authenticity opens a path for a critical cultural sociology of authenticity. This cultural ideal has promised to protect diversity, autonomy, and the freedom to be oneself, liberating individuals from social pressures to conform, but it may also (in some of its forms) produce radical suspicion and cynicism, legitimize sexism and racism, and even reproduce inequality (also see Schwarz, 2016b). While it may be tempting to try to save authenticity by claiming that Trump is not really authentic, this would be foreign to the sociological project. As we know, cultural concepts have no single "true" meaning; they are polysemic, employed in contradictory ways (for example, factual lies may still be emotionally authentic: Illouz, 2017), and as cultural ideals, they are never fully realized. Rather than enforce the allegedly true meaning of cultural concepts, our role is to explore how they are used in practice and the social effects of these uses. While philosophers contributed to the critique of notions and ethics of authenticity by identifying their internal contradictions and refuting the normative arguments supporting them (e.g. Feldman, 2015; Taylor, 1991), we sociologists can offer critique of a different kind by empirically exploring how notions and ethics of authenticity are used and identifying the (often troubling) real-world effects of these uses.²⁷

This article has put the transformation of PC within a broader context of cultural transformations in the ethic of authenticity and in the role of the sacred in political drama, and thus critically pointed to the dangers of the contemporary authenticity ethic and of radical suspicion, the assumption that any claim to values is self-interest in disguise. However, since this latter assumption often guides both neoliberal businesspersons and critical sociologists, this analysis also points to the risks involved in the performativity of another, very different strand of sociological critique that focus on the constant uncovering of dark hidden motives and may unintentionally foster radical cynicism that excludes the possibility of any orientation towards transcendent ideals, including those guiding critique itself.

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²⁷ Studying effects is one of the three main strategies of sociological critique, the others being the uncovering of hidden motives; and studying genealogies to denaturalize, relativize and historicize the objects of critique and reveal them as social constructions (for the use of this strategy to criticize authenticity, see Illouz, 2017).

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