



# The Dividing Lines of Contemporary Japan: Political Correctness in the Social Media Era

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The coronavirus outbreak uncovered various forms of division and conflict in society. Not only political and economic conflicts, but cultural conflicts between people with diverse backgrounds have intensified and “flame wars” over these have been unfolding online more or less daily.

Yet those conflicts were not caused by the coronavirus outbreak itself. Rather, it could be said that the coronavirus outbreak has brought to light the various conflicts that had already been formed in Japanese society and lay concealed within.

For example, the comedian Okamura Takashi sparked controversy in late April with a remark allegedly discriminating against women that he made on-air during a radio show, and was forced to apologize along with the radio station. This incident caused one of the biggest storms of criticisms at the time and followed a “flame war pattern” that has been repeated numerous times in the last few years.

In short, the person concerned makes a discriminatory statement without being aware of it, which is harshly attacked by well-informed persons, after which a large chorus is formed on social media, causing a storm of criticism. Meanwhile, there is a growing crowd of those criticizing the way that criticism is made, and a flame war starts as the two groups clash.

A point of issue that has repeatedly caused such conflict is the idea of “political correctness” (PC).

## The Development of PC in the USA

Political correctness (PC) is an idea whose primary aim is to curb discrimination of minorities. The issues at hand are discrimination with regard to “R” (race), “G” (gender), “C” (class), and so forth, and its aim is to prevent discriminatory treatment and expressions in the spheres of education and media.



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Originally, the term was used by some activists amid the growth of movements calling for the recognition of minorities, such as the Civil Rights Movement and Women's Liberation, in 1960s America. This flow then merged with postmodernist thought and became established in the spheres of education and academism in particular, along with the spread of discussions about the "politics of difference," including feminism and postcolonialism. In the 1980s, curricular revisions and formulations of speech codes were conducted at various universities and liberal reforms were advanced for the realization of multiculturalism, and at the helm of these developments was the PC idea.

At the same time, those movements overheated and became the subject of intense criticism from the majority side for harming social integration by "imposing the justice" of the minorities. Primarily responsible for the criticism were conservative intellectuals, politicians, and other people in the establishment class of that time. Centering on them, an "anti-PC" camp was formed, and the two sides clashed in the early 1990s, giving rise to a series of disputes called the "cultural wars."

Subsequently, with the 9/11 terrorist attacks of 2001, the focus of the cultural wars switched to issues revolving around the "clash of civilizations," thus putting aside domestic ideological disputes for the time being. However, since the mid-2010s, with the inauguration of the Trump administration, social division and conflicts have intensified and the dispute has reignited. Opposition against President Trump's remarks on racial and sexual discrimination has served to create new PC awareness especially about "R" and "G." The conflicts and disputes have extended to a variety of fields, also spreading to the areas of media and entertainment via channels like the "#MeToo movement" that started in Hollywood, thereby revitalizing the PC debate.

Meanwhile, we are also seeing the formation of a new anti-PC camp, just like in the 1990s. Yet what is different this time is that the main people involved, while still part of the majority, have actually been those who call themselves anti-establishment. They are core supporters of the Trump administration, mainly consisting of white male workers in the so-called Rust Belt.

From their standpoint, the "cultural left" that champions PC is the establishment that is centered on educated urbanites, while their calls for recognition of themselves in opposition to the self-righteousness of that establishment is what they consider "political correctness."

In other words, we can say that a new scheme has emerged where the urban Cultural Left are the central class and regional workers the marginal class, examples of a new class concept that has an added cultural axis. Based on this, a movement unfolds in opposition to the self-righteousness of the former and calling for recognition of the latter. If so, it is ironic that we may interpret this as "C"-related PC being their point at issue.

Of course, they themselves are not a minority so they have done nothing more than usurp the PC theory, so to speak. Having said that, the distinction between majority and minority is not necessarily based on any clear criteria. Of rather more importance seems to be that the group is at a disadvantage and has been driven into a marginal position.

However, if that is the case, it becomes difficult for them to assert that they themselves are not a minority. As a result, it also becomes difficult for them to say that they are not allowed to make use of the PC theory as a minority. This is because such a claim risks casting doubts on the “political correctness” of the PC idea itself, asking why this logic is applied to certain groups while not to others.

In this situation, it would appear that the PC idea has undergone what may be termed an internal split, between those who pursue issues of “R” and “G” and those who propose new issues of “C.”

Originally, the debate on the “politics of difference” was about questions of disputes between “multiple differences,” meaning between minority and minority. It can be claimed that this has now emerged as a new point at issue in the cultural war as well as brought to the fore a fundamental problem intrinsic to the PC idea.

## **The Reception of PC in Japan**

Meanwhile, in parallel with this series of developments in the USA, a similar cultural war has been fought in Japan since the the 1990s. The growing trend of “civic politics” that came with the end of the 1995 system was likewise harshly criticized by conservatives, and a series of disputes ensued. This development eventually extended to the sphere of subcultures and it was from there that the wide-ranging “internet right-wing” network was formed.

Yet PC was not the point at issue in the Japanese cultural war at that time. At the heart of liberal contentions of the time lay the modernist “civic politics” that seeks to thoroughly realize the ideas of civicism according to the model of Western European modern society, rather than the postmodernist “politics of difference” that wants to rehabilitate a variety of attributes that have been suppressed in society.

Yet, in opposition to the subsequent xenophobic trend and especially discrimination against Korean residents in Japan in parts of the internet right-wing camp, a “countermovement” centering on the “Counter-Racist Action Collective” and other initiatives were organized in the early 2010s. As part of this process, there was an increasing awareness of PC of “R” in particular. This development then spread or rather regressed from the sphere of social movements to that of culture of representation. Led by feminist researchers influenced by postmodern thought, there was an increasing awareness especially of PC of “G,” which took issue with the various representations perceived to prop up the traditionally male chauvinist Japanese social structure.

Initially, this trend only involved a small number of activists and intellectuals, but representation in a broad range of media contents, including TV commercials, TV shows, online videos, and advertisement posters, soon came to be seen as problematic. As a result, members of the general public were involved through social media and other channels as a major movement of

“hunting discriminatory expressions” was advanced. In most cases, such developments aroused considerable interest in the form of online flame wars, spread to the areas of media and entertainment too, and have frequently caused a great deal of commotion in the public sphere.

Examples in 2015 include commercials by Lumine (March) and AGF Blendy (October), Shima City’s “Aoshima Meg” (August), and Minokamo City’s “Norin beautiful girl” posters (December). In 2016, there were commercials by Nisshin Cup Noodles (April) and Shiseido Integrate (September) as well as Shibushi City’s “Unagi beautiful girl” internet video (September). These became very controversial especially for including expressions that appear to discriminate against women and some had to be retracted. Moreover, various forms of discrimination other than sexual discrimination were problematized, including the major debates on the inclusion of discriminatory expressions from LGBT and ethnicity standpoints, such as the Tunnels (October) and Downtown (December) shows.

In this way, the PC idea saw rapid spread in Japan in the 2010s, but just like in the case of the Trump administration, it is likely that the background for this was an element of opposition to the authoritarian-like character of the Abe administration.

In the first Abe Administration (2006–2007), Prime Minister Abe Shinzo strongly demonstrated a conservative view on history and education through the revision of the Fundamental Law of Education and the initiatives dealing with the Japanese history textbook issues. His apparent stance of exalting patriotism and seeking to restore patriarchal nationalism was very much at odds with feminism, postmodernism, and other values advocated by the “politics of difference.”

After that, the Democratic Party of Japan took power in 2009 and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) became the opposition. After the Great East Japan Earthquake, in 2012 the LDP returned to power and the second Abe administration was formed. Abe now abstained from making the kind of undisguised expressions that he had previously made, but he nonetheless continued to display a conservative stance. The Special Intelligence Protection Bill was submitted to the Diet in 2013 and the Legislation for Peace and Security Bill in 2015, prompting many demonstrations by people touting an “anti-Abe” message. Members of the countermovement who had taken part in “anti-discrimination” demonstrations already before this took a leading role, which brought together the two slogans “anti-Abe” and “anti-discrimination.” As a result, the PC idea came to serve as one of the supports of the Japanese left-wing<sup>1</sup> at that time as they were boosting their opposition to the conservative swing as well as building a new left-wing ideology.

At the same time, like in the American case, a new anti-PC camp was also formed. The most radical proponents were enthusiasts of *otaku* culture. This is because in particular “*moe art*” of

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<sup>1</sup> In Japan, this refers to the left-wing parties. In most cases, a supporter of the current constitution refers to someone who opposes security-related legislation and the conspiracy law, is anti-nuclear power, supports married couples retaining separate surnames, and objects to formal visits to the Yasukuni Shrine by the prime minister.

beautiful girl characters in the anime style has been a frequent target in the “discriminatory expression hunt,” which includes expressions of discrimination against women, in Japan.

Since the “Aoshima Meg” uproar in 2015, there have been numerous instances of criticisms from feminists. In response to this, there were intense counterattacks by people called “freedom of expression warriors.” This never-ending “*otaku* vs. feminist” dispute can be considered the most radical part of the new cultural war in Japan.

In this, the *otaku* have identified themselves as a minority, seeking to secure their collective identity through a shared culture of their own. They have also sought to position themselves as a marginal class by sometimes using self-deprecating words like “incels” to contrast themselves with the feminist researchers and others who make up the establishment.

As a result, again like in the American case, in proportion to the more explicit character of minority vs. minority, the PC logic is explicitly co-opted to problematize PC of “C.” This can be said to represent a more radical form of the internal split within the PC idea.

## **PC in the SNS Environment**

At the same time, the 2010s was not only when the PC idea saw rapid spread but it was also a period of rapid social media dissemination. In fact, most of the PC-related debates take place on social media and it has always been there that disputes take the shape of flame wars. Through this process, PC came to be linked with the norms of how social media is used, developing into an idea that guarantees media literacy (ML).

ML refers to skills needed to use media and is an idea originally advocated during a time when the media exerted enormous influence. It aimed to reconstruct the media environment, which has been violated by industrialism, from a perspective of civicism by “critically decoding” the intention of the sender and having the receiver “actively communicate.”

However, with the advent of the “social media era” and the weakening of mass media influence, the footing of the ML idea has likewise become unstable. “Critically decoding” at times brings about conspiratorial assumptions and “active communication” becomes first nature to social media users.

The PC we have seen so far can be said to have imbued the ML idea with new content. That is, the norm of not discriminating against minorities became a norm for the use of social media itself and also was identified as something realized by inherent skills, which resulted in a redefinition of the reality of those skills.

In particular, “reading comprehension” and “communicativity” came to carry new connotations as representation came to be problematized. That is, there was an exaltation of “critical decoding” that considered whether media content contains discriminatory expressions, regardless of the producer’s intent, or whether there are hidden discriminatory expressions that rather stem from assumptions of lack of intent. It was then encouraged for those who find such discriminatory

expressions to “actively communicate” this and strongly demand their repudiation.

In this way, the ML idea was replenished through PC and the PC idea remounted ML. As a result, PC spread a normative element of the social media era.

However, all that has come from this link between PC and social media is not necessarily desirable. The peculiar characteristics of the social media environment have also generated negative aspects.

Social media was originally a site of constant engagement in complex rating games where people are always aware of each other’s gazes and seek to increase their own rating even slightly. People’s actions are visualized there and are rated by “likes” and retweets. Especially when we look at this in connection with PC, it is all about rating people’s “correctness.”

In this context, it is not enough for people to simply do what is correct. That is, it is expected of people that they do not discriminate, so this might not lower their rating but it also does not actively increase it. In order to boost one’s rating, it is not enough to not discriminate but one must correct the discriminatory behavior of others. In other words, one must “critically decode” discriminatory expressions, “actively communicate” their existence, and “accuse” others.

As a result, “reading comprehension” and “communicativity” was redefined as “accusatory ability.” In other words, a person with a stronger accusatory ability can gain a higher rating as a person with more advanced ML and more appropriate PC.

Not only this, but in social media, a higher rating means a bigger audience. In short, it is not so much the content of the “likes” and the retweets, but it is rather their numbers that determine a person’s rating. Because of this, people sometimes make sensational accusations in a bid to draw more interest. Meanwhile, those who make the ratings react to prominent accusations as quickly as possible since they know that their way of rating will in turn be rated by others, and so they try to ally themselves with the “correct” side. As a result, sensational accusations are flooded with reactions and develop into flame wars in an instant.

The reason most PC-related debates invite online flame wars is likely that social media has mechanisms conducive to that based on its inherent “attention economy.” Moreover, this sometimes gives rise to even more fundamental irrationality.

PC has always had the aim of gaining recognition for minorities. Social media on the other hand has the aim of gaining recognition from the majority. There is no issue as long as the latter is a means to the former, but when the activities of the latter become a goal in themselves, the original significance of the PC idea is lost.

In short, its significance can be said to lie in saving the minorities from the violence of the majority and discovering values in the minorities that cannot be gained from the majority. The majority-oriented nature of social media could potentially negate the PC desire to respect minority.

I believe it is necessary for us to keep the above in mind as we watch over how these ideas operate and forge them into more original forms.

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