

Addressing the “Politically Correct” Controversies

by

Kay Hoyle Nelson

Students Responses

Even in Minnesota where students may be reluctant to engage in political sparing, we witness some of the tensions abroad in the land. In my classroom, several instances have arisen in response to the multicultural selections in the Norton anthology *New Worlds of Literature*. The first came when a very sensitive young white male confronted one issue directly, but with some trepidation, charging that, to him, the works seemed prejudiced against men; in response, a particularly bright female countered with several examples of positive, even if indirect, representations of admirable male characters. In a subsequent quarter, there was another occasion when, after class, a student approached me about the text. She was confused. It seems she had taken the book home to show her mother, a former English major who had been telling her about all the wonderful readings possible in an introductory literature course; her mother had been astonished to find a table of contents with no familiar names. More recently, another young woman asked me to stay a few minutes after the class to talk privately; she was troubled by the works which explored our country's racism.

These rather gentle reactions to radical changes in course content in no way match the turmoil highlighted recently by the media which has been watching the revolution taking place in universities across the nation, but they are a reminder that we are making substantive and substantial alterations in college curricula. And they should prompt us to recognize the controversies of “political correctness” which may emerge, if only in muted form, as the curriculum expands to include the new multicultural texts.

“Politically Correct” Made Visible

This controversy gained high visibility with the 1990 Christmas week issue of *Newsweek*. Many still recall its stony gray cover with the chiseled title *Thought Police* and the red flagged “Watch What You Say.” A brief message explained: “There’s a ‘Politically Correct’ Way to Talk about Race, Sex and Ideas. Is This the New Enlightenment—Or the New McCarthyism?” The writers’ bias appeared early in the lead article “Taking Offense”:¹

There is an experiment of sorts taking place in American Colleges. Or, more accurately, hundreds of experiments at different campuses, directed at changing of consciousness of this entire genera-

tion of university students. The goal is to eliminate prejudice, not just the petty sort that shows up on sophomore dorm walls, but the grand prejudice that has ruled American universities since their founding: that the intellectual tradition of Western Europe occupies the central place in the history of civilization. (Adler 48).

These writers hammered at the implementing:

What is distressing is that at the university, of all places, tolerance has to be imposed rather than taught, and that "progress" so often is just the replacement of one repressive orthodoxy by another. (Adler 49)

"Politically Correct" in the Culture

Earlier that September, a comparable piece by Richard Bernstein had appeared on the front page of the Sunday *New York Times*' "Arts and Leisure" section; it was entitled "The Arts Catch Up With a Society in Disarray." Three drop-quotes summarized: "America's 'new tribalism' is producing a climate of cultural combat" (1); "There are deep-seated inequities in America that are reverberating in the cultural sphere"; and "The last thing needed is a cultural consensus, even one dressed in the mantle of diversity" (12-13). Bold subheadings highlighted the gist of the article: "From Melting Pot to Tower of Babel," "Who Controls Art? Artists or Social Goals?" "The Mad Intellect of Democracy" (12), "Is Integration Out of Fashion?" "The Common Ground is Shrinking Fast," and "Myth of The Permanent Victim" (13). Bernstein alluded to a rapidly growing fragmentation of our society with groups divided along lines of race, ethnicity, and sexual preference in what he dubbed "the cult of otherness" (12). He cited the growing compulsion to adopt codes to regulate the speech and behavior. And while claiming that no one would retreat from diversity, he articulated the nagging possibility that this pressure for a "politically correct attitude" may affect not only judgment of art and culture but its production as well.

In October, a second Bernstein article targeted the sponsors of the new correctness. A strap heading made a jab at "Academia's Fashionable Orthodoxy," and the main headline employed academic jargon for a blow at "The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct" (1). The story was illustrated with a sperm-like emblem bearing the inscription "Make Tenure Not War" along with the cartoon of a graduation speaker with final reminder for students "...and as you leave these halls of learning and make your way into the world, always remember. *BUCK THE SYSTEM!*...unless of course it's mine" (4). As a demonstration of the problem within the schools Bernstein used the University of Texas/Austin's battle over the composition course "Writing on Difference" where the planned adoption of affirmative action and civil rights readings from Paula Rothenberg's collection *Racism and Sexism* had plunged the faculty into debate.² The spread of the problem was confirmed in a Berkeley conference "Political Correctness' and Cultural Studies" which convened to consider whether political pressures were

affecting scholarship. The new concept seemed recently codified in the initials "p.c.p.," with the "politically correct person" representing a "sort of unofficial ideology of the university" (1).

"Politically Correct" in a "Capital" Context

Similar sentiments appeared in a November *Wall Street Journal* "Review & Outlook" column which linked oppressive ideology, thought control, and scholarly decline. While defining the concept and decrying a curtailment of free speech, this writer parenthetically situated the power shift in terms those who stand to lose the most:

Political Correctness, though it is pervasive now on American campuses, is a subject that has received remarkably little attention beyond the schools themselves, perhaps because it strikes outsiders as silly. It isn't; it's worse than that. Political Correctness requires that students, faculty and administration project "right" opinions about women, sexism, race and the numerous other categories of victimology (white males have been identified by the Politically Correct as history's primary force of oppression). The chief victim of this effort is, of course, intellectual freedom. ("Politically Correct")

This writer located "thought control" in language control, especially in the *isms*. Under scrutiny were not terms such as *racism* and *sexism* which have gained currency, but those that still remain strange: particularly mentioned were "Ableism" defined as 'oppression of the differently abled by the temporarily abled' and "lookism—the belief that appearance is an indicator of a person's value" ("Politically Correct"). Further evidence of language and its professionals running amuck was found in the December 1990 program for the Modern Language Association annual convention in Chicago: noted was the striking contrast between missing scholarly discussion of the great writers such as Marlowe and Shakespeare and the appearance of more salacious topics such as "The Lesbian Phallus—or Does Heterosexuality Exist?" ("Politically Correct").

The writer indicated, however, that *Wall Street Journal* readers could find comfort in the broad spectrum of emerging resistance. At one end was the satire in the cartoon character created by a Brown University student, the super-enforcer P.C.P. At the other was the serious attention from academic professionals who were founding new chapters of the conservative National Association of Scholars. Then the writer dropped to the bottom line. Not yet involved in this fight were the real heavyweights—the parents who, paying nearly \$20,000 a year in tuition, would and could, upon hearing of the erosion in liberal education, bring their financial pressure to bear.

"Politically Correct" in Academe

In late November, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* also ran two stories that drew out the professional and academic considerations which complicate

the political, intellectual and artistic issues. The first article tentatively admitted the controversy with the heading "Colleges Becoming Havens of 'Political Correctness,' Some Scholars Say"; it discussed the possibility that curriculum development, committee assignments and even job retention could be affected by what some were calling a new McCarthyism. The American Association of University Professors was reporting that while there was no "wave of fear" some faculty members had become reluctant to speak out on issues of gender and race (Heller A14). But, clearly, sides were being taken. Those joining the National Association of Scholars were calling for debate on curriculum change as well race, gender, and class issues while those attempting to make the changes marvelled at the irony that they who, until recently, had had no power were being charged with totalitarian tactics.

Such disputes are not easily reconciled even when there is harmony within the opposing groups. And assuredly there is not. Later that same month, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reported dissension in its article "Proponents of 'Multicultural' Humanities Research Call for a Critical Look at Its Achievement." At the annual conference of the American Studies Association, zealots were being criticized for shifting from social analysis to rhetorical posturing, for regrouping around special interests, and for avoiding self-criticism (Winkler A5). Mediating voices were calling change. Henry Louis Gates, known for his work constructing an Afro-American canon, looked for more tolerance and a "cultural conversion" to replace "oppositional criticism" (Winkler A5). Cornel West, a Princeton professor of philosophy and Afro-American studies, worried that "The scholarship is obsessed with canon formation and canon bashing--it has become a battle between cultural supervisors" (qtd in Winkler A5). Both recognized that such internal strife could deflect attention from empowerment and might even further marginalize minority groups (Winkler A8).

Fundamental Principles in Conflict

Such political controversy in academe is hardly new for those who recall the 1930s' Marxism, the 1950s' McCarthyism, the 1960s' Civil Rights and the Viet Nam War. But this debate seems to play out differently in that it pits the two most closely held American principles: the First Amendment freedom of speech against the Fourteenth Amendment guarantee of equal protection of the law. Additionally, the issues have become mired in ethnocentrism and parochialism. In the public forum of *Newsweek*, appeals to national pride hinted that American universities have succumbed to foreign influence. Its writers argued the political orientation is "Marxist in origin, in the broad sense of attempting to redistribute power from the privileged class (white males) to the oppressed masses" (Adler 53). Moreover, they found, the recent disruptive aspects in our culture may trace intellectual underpinnings to another "foreign" import—the French deconstructionist movement which holds that hierarchy and its correlates of assessment and judgment mitigate against an egalitarian world (Adler 54).

Bloom's Plea

The *Newsweek* spokesman for the "tenured radicals"³ was Stanley Fish, widely-known proponent of reader-response criticism; he declared that all arguments come down to an ideology of "difference" replacing the older one of "coherence" (Prescott 50). This same paradigm shift was articulated at length in Allan Bloom's 1987 book *The Closing of the American Mind* which contends that American openness to new ideas has produced a closure of debate which puts the country in jeopardy of intellectual, moral, and spiritual death. Bloom's dire predictions, offered after meditation upon the students coming into his admittedly select classroom from a rapidly changing 1980s American culture, developed, however, in a form so offensively biased and defensive that many readers dismissed, did not hear, or did not care to heed a warning about a clash in values with the shift from a privileging of freedom, independence and autonomy to an apparently conflicting privileging of equality, interdependence, and community.⁴ Though Bloom's book attracted wide attention, its thesis was not particularly new. In the 1970 book *We Talk, You Listen: New Tribes, New Turf*, Native American Vine Deloria had remarked on the same phenomenon, noting that "thought patterns are shifting from the traditional emphasis on the solitary individual to as yet unrelated definitions of man as a member of a specific group" (15). But while Deloria envisioned this shift as a positive change, Bloom vehemently rejected special group interest and the focus on self as a threat to a shared vision or common interest; he feared a force that could disrupt the social contract that keeps a country from the brink of anarchy.⁵

D'Souza's Refinements

Seen in this light, *Newsweek's* gravestone cover seems a fitting capstone to Bloom's book, and though it would be consoling to find a double irony in the marker, hearing in "Watch What You Say" a last gasp prior to the burial of debate, the question of whether this is the "new enlightenment" or another repressive era grows louder. And the sides for battle still suiting up. The latest speaker commanding a wide audience is Dinesh D'Souza, a man from Bombay who attended Dartmouth, then worked as a managing editor of the Heritage Foundation's *Policy Review* and later as a policy analyst for the Reagan administration. His recently released book *Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus* has received extensive publicity. As the cover feature for the March 1991 issue of *The Atlantic*,⁶ D'Souza's twenty-page excerpt compiles evidence to support his contention that education's "bellwethers of the victims' revolution" (57) have embarked on a "fundamental restructuring of American society" (55). Reactions and reviews have been swift. In Minneapolis at the April 1991 annual conference for MELUS (the Society for the Study of Multi-Ethnic Literature of the United States), James Banks, who has written extensively on ethnic and multicultural studies, pointed to D'Souza's work as a clear signal that the battle is far from over; appropriately, on the same day, syndicated columnist James Kilpatrick briefly summarized the book under the headline "U.S. Colleges Force-feeding Multicultural Education," and reiterated D'Souza's charge of a "new

cultural imperialism" (qtd in Kilpatrick 12 A). Later, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, in an extensive review, located another disturbing angle in this debate: it indicated that D'Souza posits an even more sinister plot in multiculturalism by suggesting that its promoters insinuate into the mainstream only a "politically correct" view of other cultures (Magner A3).

Opposition Retort

Proponents of diversity have begun to marshall their forces too but these voices are not yet widely heard. In its December 1990 issue, *Lies of Our Times*, the leftist radical magazine which monitors *The New York Times*, responded to Bernstein in a series of articles and notes. The first criticized those with an ahistorical and myth-ridden view of a common tradition and culture for all Americans (Palmer 3). A second reminded readers that white males also constitute an "ethnic" group, then contended that a "politically correct" orientation has always existed (Pindell 4); a third suggested that we may not be able to claim art can be apolitical and value free (Rapping 5); finally, the most salutary note proposed that the debate over diversity may be offering an opportunity to re-examine tenets fundamental to our lives and work (Adams and Goldbard 7).⁷

An Option for Teachers

With the controversies now wide-ranging and exceedingly contentious, it appears that questions of curriculum reform which have been under way for many years will be coming under closer scrutiny. Implicit will be the concern about the extent to which the classroom is, should be, or cannot escape being a place of indoctrination rather than inquiry, with the latter the most compelling and the most problematic.⁸ As teachers of English, our immediate decisions may be focused on writing strategies oriented by process or product, composition readers that are content-neutral or content-based, and literature anthologies as a means to promote coherence or difference, but the larger context will demand attention too. For those who do not want to overtly politicize the classroom, Northwestern University professor Gerald Graff has recommended another approach which I would like to reiterate: he suggests that we bring our critical faculties to bear on these highly divisive issues, and that along with our subjects we "teach the conflict."⁹

Content Notes

1. The lead article was buttressed by three shorter pieces: Peter Prescott's "Learning to Love the PC Canon," Patrick Houston's "He Wants to Pull the Plug on the PC," and Marcus Mabry's "A View from the Front: My Life as a Member of the PC Patrol." These three exemplify the factions. The first elaborates the diversity position; the second describes the traditionalists who resist the pressure to conform even if the goal is more laudable; and the third (from the perspective of a dorm liaison) represents a nice cross between

student and administrative perspective, both of whom may just look at this debate as simply another, not unexpected, idiosyncrasy of university education—on a par, let us say, with the absent-minded professor.

2. Rothenberg has recently responded to *Newsweek's* charges of her book as a "primer of politically correct thought" by reminding her audience that on an earlier occasion George Will had brought similar charges without knowing who she was or what the book contained ("Critics" B1).

3. This term has been picked up from a book published in 1990. For a review see Kimball.

4. While many have dismissed Bloom, especially when he fights so ferociously against the feminists who have found in the Great Books ample evidence of oppression of women, his arguments are alive and well and living in the "PC" controversy. And he is not alone. Werner Sollors in his study *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* frames a similar argument, although in a more reasoned fashion, as he examines the shift in cultural codes as they appear in literature. His work on the tension between "new world content" and "old world forms" (237) proposes ethnicity as a construction, developed through stories which allow us to create and preserve culture.

5. Bloom's argues in either/or propositions to make divisiveness central and solution impossible; he insists on virtue as a control over passion, and speaks of human yearning for a sense of completion and wholeness that seems to preclude the perspective of the self as a part of a larger communal effort and existence. Using images of the herd and the hive to explore the difference in cultural orientation based on leadership and partnership, he finds a paradox in our liberal orientation which has allowed its own ethnocentric perspective to expand to such an extent that it witnesses its own collapse.

6. D'Souza may well become a leading spokesman. In April of 1991, he continues his criticism in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

7. In a December issue of *The New York Review of Books*, John Searle surveyed several books which take up the debate and marvelled that the argument has centered in English, French, Comparative Literature departments and not in other humanities; too, he wondered that although the focus is education no one really addresses what happens in the classroom.

8. *Newsweek* may have trivialized the issues by suggesting opponents jockeying for power—the traditionalists on the verge of retirement with nothing to lose willing to battle radical colleagues coming to power with a new agenda. But these complex issues seem more than "academic" dilemmas for wrangling employees. The ramifications touch all areas of education: funding for affirmative action programs; minority faculty hiring; appropriate student behavior; debate in issues of race, sex, gender, disability and

religion; curriculum transformation.

9. In a 1988 lecture, Graff explored this option.

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