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Political Correctness and the Obfuscation of Politics

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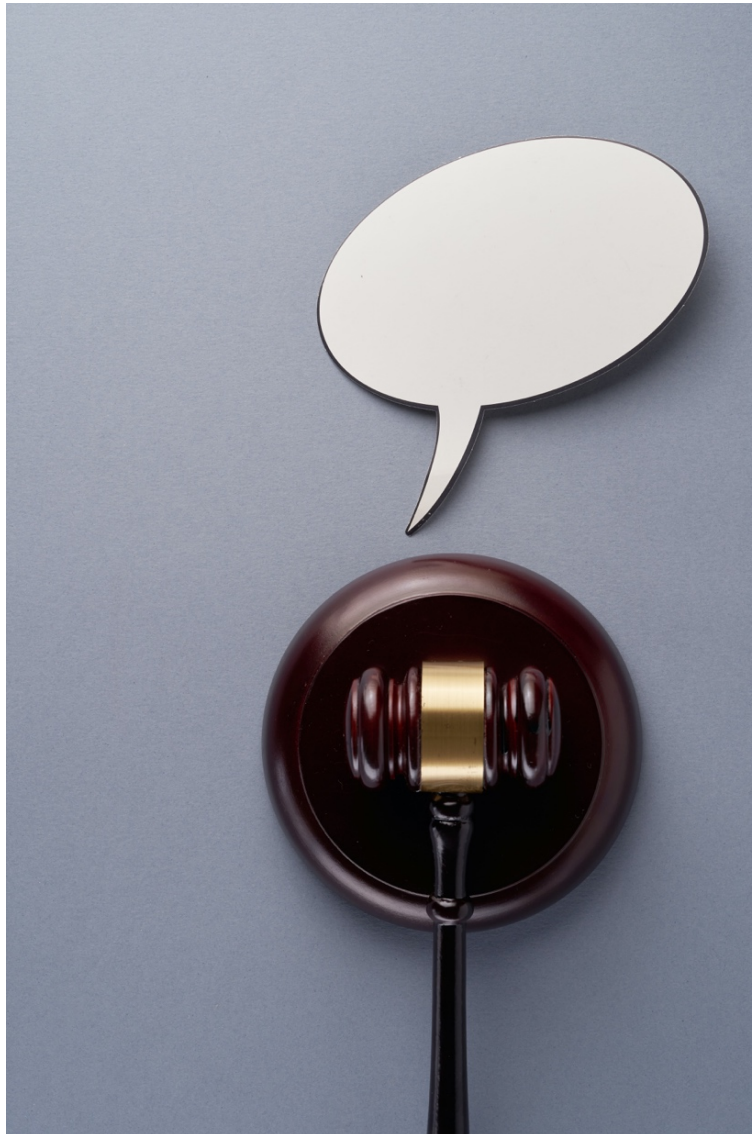


IMAGE BY ESKAY LIM VIA UNSPLASH

During the PC spasm last year I was talking regularly with friends on the board of this magazine, with colleagues at Wesleyan planning for cultural studies there, and with a group of left academics from colleges and universities in southern New England. We spent a good deal of time grousing about the assault on "political correctness" and multiculturalism, and trying to understand the phenomenon. What follows is an attempt to voice some of the exasperation we felt and sketch a "position" that was nowhere heard in the mainstream media. It came directly out of talks with my political friends, though of course I don't claim to speak for them.

The odd and infuriating thing is that attacks from the right over the past few years seem both directed at us and badly misdirected. We see our politics as radical; most of us have tenure. Are we not, then, the designated target of Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals* and of the by-now-innumerable blasts from academics like Peter Shaw, Herbert London, Stephen Balch, Carol Iannone, and other members of the National Association of Scholars; from pundits like George Will, William Safire, and Richard Bernstein; from official intellectuals of the Reagan-Bush regime like William Bennett and Lynne Cheney; and from the education President himself in his Michigan commencement address? We would be pleased to square off against such antagonists, pleased even to quicken their heartbeats with fear or loathing. Yet we don't easily recognize ourselves in their characterizations; the bullets are flying over our heads.

Not to put too fine a point on it, we work in whatever ways we can toward the end of capitalist patriarchy. No kidding. Not just canon reform or a dissident reading of *Paradise Lost*, but the transformation of society. Most of us don't expect it to happen with a bang, or indeed within our lifetimes, but what we're about is dismantling the corporate structure; taking away the money and power of those who own most of productive capital, and thus the right to determine the future of this beleaguered planet; eliminating the U.S. war machine along with all the other war machines; ending male and white supremacy; and building a social order around full equality and democratic planning for the common good. We don't know how to do all this. We have no blueprint for the future. We belong to no vanguard parties. None of us is a Leninist; only some are Marxists. We didn't rest our hopes in the Soviet Union. We are socialists and feminists convinced that the present economic and social system has finished its historical work -- including some good and much evil -- and entered a phase of disorder and destruction whose manifestations are everywhere plain. Just read the news.

We think ordinary people can make something new, something better. We ally ourselves with the millions in this country and around the world working for something that would be worth calling democracy, whether it's called socialism or not. And most of us join in that work, outside of classrooms and academic conferences. We work in peace organizations, women's groups, Central American support networks, tenants' organizing groups, gay rights groups, progressive unions, groups for Palestinian autonomy, reproductive rights groups, environmental groups, and so on and on. I don't want this to sound too virtuous and risky. We are professors. We grade papers and go to committee

meetings. We are middle-class people who live in decent homes and, if we are arrested at a demonstration, are quickly and safely out of jail: we don't suffer beatings, torture, and rape there, as do many of our brothers and sisters who are political prisoners. To claim for ourselves the name of revolutionaries would strike most as too grand. But we think that way, and we are active.

So what charges does the right lay on us? That we care only about theory. That we write in elitist jargons. That we don't believe texts have meanings. That we hate literary classics. That we think culture just expresses economic relations or prejudices of class, race, and gender. That we endorse the claims of every oppressed subculture, including the claim to cultural separatism. That we don't believe in values. That we despise history. That, in short, we are clowning mandarins -- even when occasionally seen as "dangerous" (thank you George Will). It's enough to make an aging English professor fantasize about throwing bombs.

Those of us "in" literature (many are not) do care about the issues flagged by the right, but it never gets our positions straight. The mischaracterization of "tenured radicals" in the media has entered new reaches of the bizarre in the shaping of two issues on which we do mainly agree, and on which we disagree with both so-called sides: multiculturalism and political correctness. Let me try for a little schematic clarity about these.

The right sees multiculturalism as an eroding of "the" Western tradition, an attack on aesthetic values and on value generally, a privileging of the third-rate, a campaign for ignorance, and a desecration of culture. Pardon me if I read through these concerns to a wish that the same people who managed cultural capital seventy-five years ago would again be in uncontested charge of it, and would not have to sit in meeting rooms with women, minorities, and radicals who might challenge its authority -- might want to study it as a particular historical construction rather than as the embodiment of timeless universals. Given only the choices presented to us by the media, my political friends and I would grit our teeth and choose multiculturalism, which at least weighs in against the blindness of the dominant to what they dominate, fosters respectful interest in the variety of the world's peoples, adheres to such ideals as that of affirmative action, and argues an emancipatory project for education.

But we lefties are not that keen for what often presents itself as multiculturalism. There is a version of it that takes the people of the world to be parceled out into cultures and subcultures, each self-contained and uniform, and each accessible only to its members -- so that, for instance, only a Chicana would have the authority to teach about Chicana poetry. On the contrary, we think that all cultures are in continuous exchange with others, and that even the smallest societies are not homogeneous, but embrace their own hierarchies and conflicts. The search for purity is futile. Worse, it precludes learning about cultures from outside and certifies only the "other" as a source of knowledge about other cultures. It also tends to valorize raw experience as the only foundation of knowledge, and to forbid critique of cultures except from within. This sort of multiculturalism sees people as just intrinsically what they are -- black

lesbians, white male heterosexuals, and so on. Its essentialism is almost as disturbing to us as is the fatuous universalism of the right. On top of that, it leads to a politics of identity that makes any sort of embracing social movement against capitalist patriarchy hard indeed to imagine. The fact that multiculturalism has become a slogan of many college administrations and funding sources suggests how unthreatening it is to the holders of power, and how easy to contain and control in the guise of "diversity," not to mention its usefulness in training global corporate managers.

As for political correctness: the right apparently feels not only itself but the very possibility of civilized discourse to be under siege by a phalanx of rude and stone-faced thought-cops who enforce a tyranny of newspeak, censorship, and fear. Pardon me again if I read through these touching tales of martyrdom, these ringing defenses of free speech, and see behind them an undying enmity toward sixties movements, toward whatever remains of their democratizing force in universities, and toward any challenge to dominant groups and ideas; because whatever else happened in the sixties, universities opened then to new students and to critical ideas, both new and long silenced. The right would like to cancel those gains. Given the choice presented by it and by the complaisant media, my friends and I would swallow hard and line up with the politically correct, who at least unambiguously dislike white supremacy, male supremacy, and all the "isms" that disrespect and demean.

But much about the PC phenomenon drives us up the ivied walls. Censorship, of course: we'll all take a loyalty oath to free speech. I pay dues to the American Civil Liberties Union and endorse most of its positions. And if it's OK for the Klan to speak on campus, it's surely OK for our National Association of Scholars colleagues to teach their classes (with unaccustomed responsibility for their ideas, of course). The few incidents of actual censorship, however, incidents recycled endlessly through the media, and those of egregious bad manners (with no censorship involved) that draw headlines like "Return of the Storm Troopers" (*Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 1991), are not what we mainly hold against PC, much as we deplore them. We object to PC because it is often a self-indulgent substitute for politics, a holier-than-thou moralism of the converted. PC is attitude politics, a politics of feeling good, a politics of surfaces and gestures that in its extreme form amounts to a conviction that the ills of the social order will be cured when executives no longer call their secretaries "girls" and thin people stop using the word "fat." As the right correctly (!) perceives, this is also a politics of separate issues, a catechism that can be memorized by sophomore year, a "cluster of opinions about race, ecology, feminism, culture, and foreign policy" (Richard Bernstein, *New York Times*, October 28, 1990).

What's missing is any perception that these issues are knit together in a whole system of domination, which might be grasped as a totality and strategically opposed. To be

sure, in everyday life my political friends and I also spend a lot of energy fighting specific injustices. Nobody can totalize much of the time. But unless local actions are guided by a unifying analysis and vision, they will forever be a discrete series of defensive maneuvers. And certainly discrete attitudes don't add up to a radical politics; they aren't even politically correct, in the bad old Stalinist sense that we have evoked for years, always ironically, when we have used the now useless term. These debates will block understanding, if carried forward in their present terms. For instance, they hide the role of the right itself in generating excesses of PC multiculturalism, by trimming alternative programs until the dispossessed are left fighting one another for jobs and turf. More broadly, the media spasm about PC obscures the fact that battles over the canon and insulting language take place in just a small corner of the university, not to mention the whole educational system. In the university as a whole the core curriculum is neither Shakespeare nor Alice Walker. It is accounting, computer programming, training for service jobs or for Wall Street high flying, acceptance of such divisions of labor as natural and unchangeable, the quiet reproduction of inequality, and political hopelessness. Add K-12, and the whole curriculum reveals itself as a far-from-benign neglect of most students and teachers. That's the only curriculum the right has proposed for just about everyone who doesn't make it to Harvard.

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The threat is genuine; for just one example, the right has virtually closed off support for emancipatory research in the humanities, through its putsch at the National Endowment (see Stephen Burd, "Chairman of Humanities Fund Has Politicized Grants Process, Critics Charge," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 22, 1992). But we won't get far in opposing their program by lining up to defend the bad versions of multiculturalism and political correctness. Do it when cornered; the politically correct are not our enemy, and Lynne Cheney is. But remember that our aim is to scrap the tired yet violent project of capitalist patriarchy and move on to a new one that will allow human beings to flourish in their common weal.



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