

The PC Tyranny

By Lou Marinoff

political correctness (noun): conformity to a belief that language and practices which could offend political sensibilities should be eliminated.

Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary

I've been invited to write about political correctness and philosophy in the North American academy. What qualifies me? I'm a refugee from political correctness. I emigrated from Canada to the USA because of an insidious quota system, euphemistically called 'employment equity', which decrees that there are too many white male philosophers in Canadian universities. The Nuremburg Laws excluded Jews from Nazified German universities because we were 'non-Aryan'; Jews are now excluded from Canadian universities because we are 'white'. This is a compelling irony. It compelled me to get the hell out.

Before quitting Canada in 1994, I penned a satire on political correctness, called *Fair New World*. Libertarian lawyer Karen Selick called it "the most politically incorrect work of art I have ever seen. It's also hilariously funny and scathingly insightful." Since no Canadian publisher had the courage to bring it out, I founded my own press, Backlash Books, and published it myself. *Fair New World* continues to be taught in colleges and universities, by politically absolutely incorrect professors, all of whom have received Backlash Books' highest award: 'Offender of the Faith'. So much for my political credentials.

I am currently tenured at The City College of New York, which graduated eight eventual Nobel laureates among its illustrious alumni of halcyon years, but where thanks to a generation of open admissions Great Books have been replaced by Comic Books. What kind of refuge is this? I offer two stock answers. To the cognoscenti, I reply that I have Bertrand Russell's job. Russell's appointment at CCNY was infamously denied by the

New York Supreme Court, which convicted him, much as Athens convicted Socrates, of moral corruption. Instead of putting Russell to death, they merely denied him employment. This is called 'social progress'. To the incognoscenti, I reply that I was hired by CCNY to fill a quota system: New York City was running short of Jews, so they imported me.

By now you should be persuaded that I am politically incorrect enough to write this piece. Now let me unpack Webster's definition. First, to which 'political sensibilities' does it allude? These generally entail a Rousseauesque-cum-Marxist vision of the world, which perceives humanity as an innocent and well-meaning horde of erstwhile noble savages, inequitably differentiated by race, class and gender by an evil conspiracy of white male heterosexual patriarchal hegemonists, who use logic, mathematics, science, classics, capitalism, democracy and testosterone to disenfranchise politically and deprive socio-economically the rest of the world, who are the 'victims' of 'oppression'.

While Marx's putative 'remedy' was partly predicated on his slogan 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his need', current political correctness is incomparably more surreal: it has no truck with ability at all, which it finds intolerably offensive and therefore among the first things slated for elimination. For example, many primary schools now give ribbons to all children who run in field-day races, because they are terrified of 'offending' and therefore also (by the puerile etiology that informs their worldview) of *traumatising* the children who do not win or place in the contest. Thus they have confused fleetness of foot with moral worthiness. This has two serious consequences.

First, at the grass-roots level, political correctness fails to teach children that sportsmanship and self-development are the lasting lessons of competition. Win or lose, one is morally worthy if one runs the race and does one's best. If Jane is a better runner than Sally, there is nothing wrong (i.e. 'offensive') about rewarding Jane for fleetness of foot. If Jane wins a gold medal and Sally finishes out of the medals, it means that Jane is a *better runner than* Sally: it does not mean that Jane is *better than* Sally. But a politically correct race is socially-engineered: all runners must finish together, or all must receive identical ribbons regardless of place. This is an offence against fleetness of foot. It is

typical of a pervasive unwillingness to acknowledge natural and acquired differences among human beings, which in turn devalues individual excellence and obliterates moral worthiness. That is an offence against humanity.

The second consequence marks a death-threat to American democracy. Tocqueville had observed presciently that Americans must choose between liberty and equality. Any undeluded person knows that equality of opportunity leads inevitably to inequality of outcome. However, the inability of political correctness to tolerate unequal outcomes in the wake of equal opportunities, and its dogmatic commitment to a neo-Marxist doctrine that equates justice and fairness with a levelling of outcomes, have contorted the North American Academy into a sublime estate, in which equal outcomes in higher education are guaranteed by pervasive illiteracy, innumeracy and aculturality. The Academy has become a neo-Procrustean Inn, whose former halls of learning are converted into dormitories of indoctrination, whose patrons (the students) have their heads chopped off instead of their legs, so that all fit equally into its deconstructed cots.

The 'language and practices' that offend the deepest sensibilities of political correctness form the very foundations of Western civilization: the languages of logic, mathematics, classics, philosophy— along with the language of Shakespeare too— and the practices of science, capitalism, democracy and due legal process—along with the inescapably allied and respective notions of reliable method, generation of wealth, government by consent of the governed, and protection of inalienable individual rights. By metastasising like an opportunistic cancer throughout the mind-politic of the academy, political correctness has proceeded, true to Webster's definition, to eliminate the language and practice of Western civilization itself, and therefore to kill the very body-politic upon which it parasitically feeds. Lest you deem my accusations implausible or exaggerated, I will regale you with a few examples.

Grade inflation is rampant in American universities, to the extent that undergraduate degrees are increasingly worthless pieces of paper. From the Ivy to the Poison Ivy Leagues, institutions have capitulated to 'egalitarian' demands that students receive A's for attendance. They graduate hapless victims of victimology, who can neither read with

comprehension nor write grammatically correct sentences. When such students receive D's or F's in my upper-level philosophy electives, they complain that they are 'straight-A' majors in psychology, or education, or in some other department that subscribes to the barker's slogan 'Everybody plays, everybody wins'. By the same token, one very bright and hard-working student, who happened to be a black female, asked me if she had really 'earned' the A she received in my course. When I assured her that she merited the grade based on her performance and nothing else, she actually wept with gratitude - at having been allowed to display her merit. By contrast, politically correct ideology systematically deprives excellent students of opportunities to excel, so as not to 'offend' mediocrity and worse.

Political correctness eradicates individual liberties as well as merit. Princeton University's Office of Student Life annually prints a handbook lauding 'tolerance' and extolling the 'virtues' of cultural diversity. The office also compels attendance at freshman orientation films, one of which illustrates methods of contraception and abortion. When a Roman Catholic student tried to exit the cinema, asserting that she had no need watch these practices because her religion forbade them, she was physically prevented from leaving. She was coerced (in the name of tolerance and diversity!) to watch the entire film. This is another face of political correctness: rank hypocrisy.

Freedom of speech was an early casualty. In denial, Katherine Whitehorn wrote in the London *Observer*: "The thing has been blown up out of all proportion. PC language is not enjoined on one and all - there are a lot more places where you can say 'spic' and 'bitch' with impunity than places where you can smoke a cigarette." She should have been at a Canadian University in 1994, when a professor of political science remarked jocularly to a teaching assistant noted for her stern grading: "I'll bet the students think you're a real black bitch." The president of that university promptly shut down the graduate studies program in political science, while the teaching assistant sued the university and pocketed more than \$300,000. (Hey, for that kind of cash, you can call me anything you like.) This catapulted UBC onto the national news, and cost the president his job. Stand-up comedy proliferates precisely because the comics remain at liberty to say what—thanks to political correctness—their audiences are increasingly afraid to think.

Around the same time, Yale University was busily refusing a gift of 20 million dollars, offered by a Texas oilman and patron of high culture. He wanted the money spent on a humanities program that celebrated Great Books of Western civilization. Unfortunately, Yale was long-since committed to the politically correct doctrine that there are no great books, that the idea of great books is a pernicious myth used to oppress illiterate and innumerate savages, to keep women barefoot and pregnant, to exploit the developing world, and to glorify dead white European males who apparently plagiarised Western civilization from an unidentified tribe of transvestites. Thus Yale could not possibly accept 20 million dollars to teach so-called 'Great Books', either because 'greatness' is entirely arbitrary, or because recognising a few 'Great Books' would be offensive to a great many inconsequential ones.

PC hiring practices are utterly Orwellian. In a Canadian university, a male and a female candidate were finalists for a tenurable position in philosophy. The male was demonstrably better qualified, but the female was offered the position owing to an alleged 'gender imbalance'. Two members of the selection committee were willing to testify to the province's Human Rights Commission that the female's appointment had been politically orchestrated. But when the male finalist formally asked the province's HRC to investigate, his request was summarily denied. He was informed by the HRC that, since he was a white male, it was impossible for anyone to discriminate against him.

The siege engines of political correctness have been dragged to the very walls of MIT, where cries of 'gender imbalance' herald the administrative re-allocation of scientific funding to satisfy arbitrary gender quotas. Copious evidence on sex difference, much of it accumulated by female researchers themselves, shows that males are, on average and by nature, more adept than females at mathematical and spatio-temporal reasoning. But any fact that offends regnant political sensibility is dismissed as a 'social construct', and ignored by wishful thinking. The politically correct explanation for the dearth of female Newtons and Einsteins is that female geniuses have been 'oppressed' by the usual conspiracy of white males, and by the very institution of civilization itself.

And what is philosophy's explicit role in all this? It varies across a continuum. In so far as academic philosophers are political animals, prey to the edicts of a brain-dead academy, they either resist political correctness, or pay lip-service to it, or embrace it according to their respective lights or darkneses. But those who fail to resist its fatuous tyranny, or who revel in its egregious self-righteousness become apologists for the deconstruction of the very intellectual culture that makes philosophy possible, and accomplices to the sapping of the principles which sustain that culture itself. Thus North American philosophers who champion group rights and trample individual liberties (epitomised by proponents of quota-based hirings), who hysterically demonise reason, and who absurdly deny Hume's distinction between fact and value on the alleged grounds that all ideas are 'social constructs', excepting this idea itself, which they take as brute fact (epitomised by Richard Rorty's flagrant anti-realism) - these are not lovers of wisdom, but high priests and handmaidens of hubris.

To philosophy students who can yet read, I recommend J S Mill's *On Liberty*. His enlightened conception entails

...liberty of tastes and pursuits, of framing the plan of our life to suit our own character, of doing as we like, without impediment from our fellow creatures, so long as what we do does not harm them, even though they should think our conduct foolish, perverse, or wrong.

Mill's salient distinction is between offence and harm; its implications for political correctness are pellucid. People who are offended by others' languages and practices should not have the liberty to eliminate them, as long as such words and deeds are not harmful. But once this critical distinction between offence and harm is blurred, as it is daily and extravagantly by the politically correct, then those who blur it arrogate to themselves the supremely illegitimate authority to proscribe whatever conduct they deem 'offensive' (for example, affairs between professors and graduate students, or ideologically unpopular research), to silence whatever speech they deem 'offensive' (such as ethnic humour or sexual innuendo), and to censor whatever ideas they deem 'offensive' (for example that there are biologically-based human differences that may not be

eradicable by social engineering, or that equal opportunity virtually guarantees unequal outcomes). The near-ubiquitous conflation of offence with harm has sanctioned a thirty-year reign of political terror in North American universities, whose degenerate administrative ideologues daily micromanage the minutiae of thought, speech and deed.

In such a totalitarian climate, philosophers who fail to draw and defend Mill's distinction between offence and harm are not only professionally derelict, but are also party to the catastrophe that has ensued from its blurring.

The 'dark side' of philosophy is compassed both by what it has failed to do in defence and preservation its own mission—the love of wisdom—and by what this failure has permitted the enemies of open and reasoned inquiry to entrench in its place: the worship of folly.

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