

## IDEAS &amp; TRENDS; The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct

By RICHARD BERNSTEIN  
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INSTEAD of writing about literary classics and other topics, as they have in the past, freshmen at the University of Texas next fall will base their compositions on a packet of essays on discrimination, affirmative-action and civil-rights cases. The new program, called "Writing on Difference," was voted in by the faculty last month and has been praised by many professors for giving the curriculum more relevance to real-life concerns. But some see it as a stifling example of academic orthodoxy.

"You cannot tell me that students will not be inevitably graded on politically correct thinking in these classes," Alan Gribben, a professor of English, said at the time the change was being discussed.

The term "politically correct," with its suggestion of Stalinist orthodoxy, is spoken more with irony and disapproval than with reverence. But across the country the term p.c., as it is commonly abbreviated, is being heard more and more in debates over what should be taught at the universities. There are even initials -- p.c.p. -- to designate a politically correct person. And though the terms are not used in utter seriousness, even by the p.c.p.'s themselves, there is a large body of belief in academia and elsewhere that a cluster of opinions about race, ecology, feminism, culture and foreign policy defines a kind of "correct" attitude toward the problems of the world, a sort of unofficial ideology of the university. Pressure to Conform

Last weekend, a meeting of the Western Humanities Conference in Berkeley, Calif., was called " 'Political Correctness' and Cultural Studies," and it examined what effect the pressure to conform to currently fashionable ideas is having on scholarship.

Central to p.c.-ness, which has roots in 1960's radicalism, is the view that Western society has for centuries been dominated by what is often called "the white male power structure" or "patriarchal hegemony." A related belief is that everybody but white heterosexual males has suffered some form of repression and been denied a cultural voice or been prevented from celebrating what is commonly called "otherness."

"We, the non-Western-Europeans, have no greatness, no culture, no explanations, no beauty, perhaps no humanity," said Amanda Kemp, a student at Stanford University who was active in the campaign three years ago to eliminate a required course in Western civilization. The view that Western civilization is inherently unfair to minorities, women and homosexuals has been at the center of politically correct thinking on campuses ever since the recent debate over university curriculums began.

Affirmative action is politically correct. So too are women's studies, gay and lesbian studies, and African-American studies, all of which are strongly represented in the scholarly panels at such professional meetings as those of the American Historical Association and the Modern Language Association. Politically correct papers include "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," "Brotherly Love: Nabokov's Homosexual Double" and "A Womb of His Own: Male Renaissance Poets in the Female Body," which were on the program for the M.L.A. conference last year in Washington.

The cluster of politically correct ideas includes a powerful environmentalism and, in foreign policy, support for Palestinian self-determination and sympathy for third world revolutionaries, particularly those in Central America. Biodegradable garbage bags get the p.c. seal of approval. Exxon does not.

But more than an earnest expression of belief, "politically correct" has become a sarcastic jibe used by those, conservatives and classical liberals alike, to describe what they see as a growing intolerance, a closing of debate, a pressure to conform to a radical program or risk being accused of a commonly reiterated trio of thought crimes: sexism, racism and homophobia.

"It's a manifestation of what some are calling liberal fascism," said Roger Kimball, the author of "Tenured Radicals," a critique of what he calls the politicization of the humanities. "Under the name of pluralism and freedom of speech, it is an attempt to enforce a narrow and ideologically motivated view of both the curriculum and what it means to be an educated person, a responsible citizen."

Certain subjects, such as affirmative action and homosexuality, have been removed from civil debate, Mr. Kimball says, so strong is the force to accept the politically correct view. More accurately, perhaps, the figures on campuses opposed to affirmative action, for example, are regarded as radicals of the right.

Some of the intolerance of the p.c. point of view comes from conservatives like Mr. Kimball and Allan Bloom, the author of "The Closing of the American Mind," who complain that there is a hidden radical agenda in university curriculums. The p.c.p.'s respond that they are reacting to an orthodoxy set in place by the traditionalists.

Drawing on the theories of Marxist and deconstructionist literary critics, some even question the very notion that there is such a thing as disinterested, objective scholarship. Some conservatives see a paradox in this.

"Those who are critics of objectivity, who reject claims about standards and quality, contradict themselves in believing so powerfully that they are the holders of the only truth," said Leon Botstein, the president of Bard College. Mr. Botstein, a critic of both the p.c.p.'s and their conservative adversaries, feels that the universities are being polarized into two intolerant factions. "The idea of candor and the deeper idea of civil discourse is dead," he said. "The victims are the students."

Professor Gribben, who opposed the curriculum change at the University of Texas, has been denounced in the campus newspaper as a right-winger; a rally was held on campus to harangue him. "I just wanted to question a few features and my world fell apart," he said.

The dubious implications of a politically correct orthodoxy have fallen under some scrutiny by the left, and that is what the conference last weekend at Berkeley was about.

In truth, a good deal of the conference was more an illustration of p.c.-ness than an examination of it. There was, for example, a panel discussion of the recently created "American cultures" requirement at Berkeley -- in which students study the contributions that minority groups have made to American society. Though the course is controversial -- it has been called "compulsory chapel" by its detractors -- all four panelists were ardent defenders of the idea. Susan Schweik of the Berkeley English department defended the course, saying, "American culture already works on us as a compulsory chapel of racism." The new course, she argued, "lends itself by definition to complexities, to arguments between and within students, to diversity of voices and stances."

But there were worries expressed in papers and conversations that p.c.-ness has become a rigid concept, a new orthodoxy that does not allow for sufficient complexity in scholarship or even much clarity in thinking. One speaker, Michel Chaouli, a graduate student in comparative literature at Berkeley, said that "politically correct discourse is a kind of fundamentalism," one that gives rise to "pre-fab opinions." Among its features, he said, are "tenacity, sanctimoniousness, huffiness, a stubborn lack of a sense of humor."

Mr. Chaouli's paper was probably the most frontal assault on p.c.-ness at the conference, most of whose participants were rather gingerly in their criticisms, allowing that, yes, some p.c. ideas needed refinement, but the overall thrust of the p.c. program remained, as it were, correct. There was no challenge to such ideas as unequivocal support for affirmative action or the legitimacy of gay and lesbian studies.

When Mr. Chaouli referred to the belief in an unsympathetic power structure dominating American life as "a fantasm," he was immediately reprimanded and accused of being a "right-winger" by a member of the audience. Mr. Chaouli's critic said his ideas flew in the face of what everybody knew to be true, namely that American society was, of course, hegemonic.

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## LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD



here once was a young person named Red Riding Hood who lived with her mother on the edge of a large wood. One day her mother asked her to take a basket of fresh fruit and mineral water to her grandmother's house—not because this was womyn's work, mind you, but because the deed was generous and helped engender a feeling of community. Furthermore, her grandmother was *not* sick, but rather was in full physical and mental health and was fully capable of taking care of herself as a mature adult.

## POLITICALLY CORRECT BEDTIME STORIES

So Red Riding Hood set off with her basket through the woods. Many people believed that the forest was a foreboding and dangerous place and never set foot in it. Red Riding Hood, however, was confident enough in her own budding sexuality that such obvious Freudian imagery did not intimidate her.

On the way to Grandma's house, Red Riding Hood was accosted by a wolf, who asked her what was in her basket. She replied, "Some healthful snacks for my grandmother, who is certainly capable of taking care of herself as a mature adult."

The wolf said, "You know, my dear, it isn't safe for a little girl to walk through these woods alone."

Red Riding Hood said, "I find your sexist remark offensive in the extreme, but I will ignore it because of your traditional status as an outcast from society, the stress of which has caused you to develop your own, entirely valid, worldview. Now, if you'll excuse me, I must be on my way."

Red Riding Hood walked on along the main path. But, because his status outside society had freed him from slavish adherence to linear, Western-style thought, the wolf knew a quicker route to Grandma's house. He burst into the house and ate Grandma, an entirely valid course of action for a car-

## LITTLE RED RIDING HOOD

nivore such as himself. Then, unhampered by rigid, traditionalist notions of what was masculine or feminine, he put on Grandma's nightclothes and crawled into bed.

Red Riding Hood entered the cottage and said, "Grandma, I have brought you some fat-free, sodium-free snacks to salute you in your role of a wise and nurturing matriarch."

From the bed, the wolf said softly, "Come closer, child, so that I might see you."

Red Riding Hood said, "Oh, I forgot you are as optically challenged as a bat. Grandma, what big eyes you have!"

"They have seen much, and forgiven much, my dear."

"Grandma, what a big nose you have—only relatively, of course, and certainly attractive in its own way."

"It has smelled much, and forgiven much, my dear."

"Grandma, what big teeth you have!"

The wolf said, "I am happy with *who* I am and *what* I am," and leaped out of bed. He grabbed Red Riding Hood in his claws, intent on devouring her. Red Riding Hood screamed, not out of alarm at the

## POLITICALLY CORRECT BEDTIME STORIES

wolf's apparent tendency toward cross-dressing, but because of his willful invasion of her personal space.

Her screams were heard by a passing woodchopper-person (or log-fuel technician, as he preferred to be called). When he burst into the cottage, he saw the melee and tried to intervene. But as he raised his ax, Red Riding Hood and the wolf both stopped.

"And just what do you think you're doing?" asked Red Riding Hood.

The woodchopper-person blinked and tried to answer, but no words came to him.

"Bursting in here like a Neanderthal, trusting your weapon to do your thinking for you!" she exclaimed. "Sexist! Speciesist! How dare you assume that womyn and wolves can't solve their own problems without a man's help!"

When she heard Red Riding Hood's impassioned speech, Grandma jumped out of the wolf's mouth, seized the woodchopper-person's ax, and cut his head off. After this ordeal, Red Riding Hood, Grandma, and the wolf felt a certain commonality of purpose. They decided to set up an alternative household based on mutual respect and cooperation, and they lived together in the woods happily ever after.

## THE EMPEROR'S NEW CLOTHES



ar away, in a time long past, there lived a traveling tailor who found himself in an unfamiliar country. Now, tailors who move from place to place normally keep to themselves and are careful not to overstep the bounds of local decency. This tailor, though, was overly gregarious and decorum-impaired, and soon he was at a local inn, abusing alcohol, invading the personal space of the female employees, and telling unenlightened stories about tinkers, dung-gatherers, and other tradespeople.

The innkeeper complained to the police, who

“Don’t try it, Napoleon,” said the queen. “This forest is property of the crown. *You* are the ones who are trespassing!”

This rejoinder caused quite a stir, but not as big a commotion as when the queen warned: “And another thing. While we were immobile and you all blathered on in your sexist way, I had a personal awakening. From now on, I am going to dedicate my life to healing the rift between womyn’s souls and their bodies. I am going to teach womyn to accept their natural body images and become whole again. Snow White and I are going to build a womyn’s spa and conference center on this very spot, where we can hold retreats, caucuses, and ovariums for the sisters of the world.”

There was much shouting and name-calling, but the queen eventually had her way. Before the Seven Towering Giants could be evicted from their home, though, they packed up their sweat lodge and moved deeper into the woods. The prince stayed on at the spa as a cute but harmless tennis pro. And Snow White and the queen became good friends and earned worldwide fame for their contributions to sisterhood. The giants were never heard from again, save for little muddy footprints that were sometimes found in the morning outside the windows of the spa’s locker room.

## CHICKEN LITTLE



Chicken Little lived on a winding country lane surrounded by tall oak trees. (It should be mentioned here that the name “Little” was a family name, and not a derogatory, size-biased nickname. It was only by sheer coincidence that Chicken Little was also of shorter-than-average height.)

One day, Chicken Little was playing in the road when a gust of wind blew through the trees. An acorn was blown loose and hit Chicken Little squarely on the head.

Now, while Chicken Little had a small brain in the physical sense, she did use it to the best of her abilities. So when she screamed, “The sky is falling, the sky is falling!” her conclusion was not wrong or stupid or silly, only logically underenhanced.

Chicken Little ran down the road until she came to the house of her neighbor, Henny Penny, who was tending her garden. This was a simple task, since she didn't use any insecticide, herbicide, or fertilizer, and also permitted the native nonedible varieties of wildflower (sometimes branded "weeds") to mingle with her food crops. So, lost amid the foliage, Henny Penny heard Chicken Little's voice long before she saw her.

"The sky is falling! The sky is falling!"

Henny Penny stuck her head out from her garden and said, "Chicken Little! Why are you carrying on so?"

Chicken Little said, "I was playing in the road when a huge chunk of the sky fell and landed on my head. See? Here's the bump to prove it."

"There's just one thing to do," said Henny Penny.

"What's that?" asked Chicken Little.

"Sue the bastards!" said Henny Penny.

Chicken Little was puzzled. "Sue for what?"

"Personal injury, discrimination, intentional infliction of emotional distress, negligent infliction of emotional distress, tortious interference, the tort of outrage—you name it, we'll sue for it."

"Good gracious!" said Chicken Little. "What will we get for all of that?"

"We can get payment for pain and suffering, com-

pensatory damages, punitive damages, disability and disfigurement, long-term care, mental anguish, impaired earning power, loss of esteem. . . ."

"Person, oh, person!" said Chicken Little joyfully. "Who are we going to sue?"

"Well, I don't think the sky *per se* is recognized as a suable entity by the state," said Henny Penny.

"I guess we should go find a lawyer and learn who *is* suable," said Chicken Little, her diminutive brain working overtime.

"That's a good idea. And while we're there, I can ask whom to sue for these ridiculously bony legs of mine. They've caused me nothing but anguish and embarrassment my whole life, and I should be compensated somehow for all that."

So they ran farther down the road until they came to the house of their neighbor, Goosey Loosey. Goosey Loosey was busy teaching her canine animal companion to eat grass so she could avoid the guilty feelings that came with feeding the dog processed animal carcasses from a can.

"The sky is falling! The sky is falling!"

"Sue the bastards! Sue the bastards!"

Goosey Loosey leaned over her fence and said, "Land sakes! Why are you two carrying on so?"

## POLITICALLY CORRECT BEDTIME STORIES

"I was playing in the road and a piece of sky fell on my head," explained Chicken Little.

"So we're going to find a lawyer to tell us whom we can sue both for her injuries and for my bony legs."

"Oh good! Can I come and sue someone for my long, gangly neck? You know, nothing really flatters it, so I am convinced there's a conspiracy within the fashion industry against long-necked waterfowl."

So the three of them ran down the road looking for legal assistance.

"The sky is falling! The sky is falling!"

"Sue the bastards! Sue the bastards!"

"Smash the conspiracy! Smash the conspiracy!"

Farther down the road they met Foxy Loxy, who was dressed in a blue suit and carried a briefcase. He held up a paw to halt the entourage.

"And what are you three doing out on this lovely day?" asked Foxy Loxy.

"We're looking for someone to sue!" they shouted in unison.

"What are your grievances? Personal injury? Discrimination? Intentional infliction of emotional distress? Negligent infliction of emotional distress? Tortious interference? The tort of outrage?"

## CHICKEN LITTLE

"Oh, yes, yes," the three said excitedly, "all that and more!"

"Well, then, you're in luck," said Foxy Loxy. "My caseload has just eased up, so I will be able to represent you in any and all lawsuits we can manage to bring."

The trio cheered and flapped their wings. Chicken Little asked, "But who are we going to sue?"

Without missing a beat, Foxy Loxy said, "Who aren't we going to sue? Three hapless victims such as yourselves will be able to find more guilty parties than you can shake a writ at. Now, let's all step into my office so we can discuss this further."

Foxy Loxy walked over to a small black metal door that was in the side of a small hill nearby. "Step right this way," he said as he lifted the latch. But the black door wouldn't open. Foxy Loxy tugged on it with one paw, then with both. It still wouldn't budge. He yanked and pulled violently, cursing the door, its mental abilities, and its sexual history.

Finally the door swung open, and a huge ball of fire shot out. This was really the door to Foxy Loxy's oven! But unfortunately for him, the ball of fire engulfed his head, burned off every hair and

## POLITICALLY CORRECT BEDTIME STORIES

whisker, and left him totally catatonic. Chicken Little, Henny Penny, and Goosey Loosey ran away, thankful that they had not been devoured.

However, the family of Foxy Loxy caught up with them. In addition to suing the manufacturer of the oven door on behalf of Foxy Loxy, the family brought suit against the three above-named barnyard fowl, claiming entrapment, reckless endangerment, and fraud. The family sought payment for pain and suffering, compensatory damages, punitive damages, disability and disfigurement, long-term care, mental anguish, impaired earning power, loss of esteem, and the loss of a good dinner. The three birds later brought a countersuit, and they've all been battling in court from that day to this.

## THE FROG PRINCE



nce there was a young princess who, when she grew tired of beating her head against the male power structure at her castle, would relax by walking into the woods and sitting beside a small pond. There she would amuse herself by tossing her favorite golden ball up and down and pondering the role of the eco-feminist warrior in her era.

One day, while she was envisioning the utopia that her queendom could become if womyn were in the positions of power, she dropped the ball, which rolled into the pond. The pond was so deep and murky she couldn't see where it had gone. She didn't cry, of course, but she made a mental note to be more careful next time.