

Taking Offense

Is this the new enlightenment on campus or the new McCarthyism?

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Thought Police

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Perhaps Nina Wu, a sophomore at the University of Connecticut, actually didn't like gays. More likely, she thought she was being funny when she allegedly put up a sign on the door to her dorm room listing "people who are shot on sight" -- among them, "preppies," "bimbos," "men without chest hair" and "homos." No protests were heard from representatives of the first three categories, but UConn's gay community was more forthright in asserting its prerogatives. Wu was brought up on charges of violating the student-behavior code, which had recently been rewritten to prohibit "posting or advertising publicly offensive, indecent or abusive matter concerning persons . . . and making personal slurs or epithets based on race, sex, ethnic origin, disability, religion or sexual orientation." Found guilty last year in a campus administration's hearing, Wu was . . . what would you guess? Reprimanded? Ordered to write a letter of apology? No, Wu was ordered to move off campus and forbidden to set foot in any university dormitories or cafeterias. Only under pressure of a federal lawsuit did the university let her move back onto campus this year -- and revise the Code of Student Conduct to make it conform to a higher code, the First Amendment.

There is an experiment of sorts taking place in American colleges. Or, more accurately, hundreds of experiments at different campuses, directed at changing the consciousness of this entire generation of university students. The goal is to eliminate prejudice, not just of 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. In this context it would not be enough for a student to refrain from insulting homosexuals or other minorities. He or she would be expected to "affirm" their presence on campus and to study their literature and culture alongside that of Plato, Shakespeare and Locke. This agenda is broadly shared by most organizations of minority students, feminists and gays. It is also the program of a generation of campus radicals who grew up in the '60s and are now achieving positions of academic influence. If they no longer talk of taking to the streets, it is because they now are gaining access to the conventional weapons of campus politics: social pressure, academic perks (including tenure) and -- when they have the administration on their side -- outright coercion.

There is no conspiracy at work here, just a creed, a set of beliefs and expressions which students from places as diverse as Sarah Lawrence and San Francisco State recognize instantly as "PC" -- politically correct. Plunk down a professor from Princeton, in the University of Wisconsin at Madison, show him a student in a tie-dyed T shirt, with open-toed sandals and a grubby knapsack dangling a student-union-issue, environmentally sound, reusable red plastic cup, and he'll recognize the type instantly. It's "PC Person," an archetype that has now been certified in the official chronicles of American culture, the comic pages. Jeff Shesol, a student cartoonist at Brown, created him as an enforcer of radical cant, so sensitive to potential slights that he even knows the correct euphemism for 9-year-old "girls." He calls them "pre-women."

That is appalling, or would be if it were true. What happened to Nina Wu is in fact appalling, as the university itself seems to have admitted. But so was the incident that led UConn to prohibit "personal slurs" in the first place: a group of white students taunting and spitting at Asian-American students on their way to a dance. If women, gays and racial minorities are seeking special protections, it is because they have been the objects of special attacks. (According to sociologist Howard Ehrlich, each year one minority student in five experiences "ethnoviolent attack," including verbal assaults.) If African-Americans are challenging the primacy of Western civilization, it is because for centuries they were oppressed by it. The oppressed have no monopoly on truth. But surely they have earned the right to critique the society that enslaved them.

The content of PC is, in some respects, uncontroversial: who would defend racism? 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.

Shelf struggle: The march of PC across American campuses has hardly been unopposed. On the contrary, it has provoked the most extreme reaction, from heartfelt defenses of the First Amendment to the end-of-the-world angst of a Rabelais scholar whose subject has just been dropped from the freshman lit course in favor of Toni Morrison. Opponents of PC now have their own organization, the National Association of Scholars (based in Princeton, N.J.), "committed to rational discourse as the foundation of academic life." It is supported mostly by conservative foundations, but its 1,400 members include some prominent liberals such as Duke political scientist James David Barber, former chair of Amnesty International USA. Duke is a microcosm of the struggle over PC, which is being fought right down to the shelves in the campus bookstore, and not always entirely by rational disclosure. Barber talked into the political-science section one day last spring and turned on its spine every volume with "Marx" in its title -- about one out of seven by his count, a lot more attention than he thought it warrants -- and angrily demanded their removal. His attempt to organize an NAS chapter at Duke touched off a battle with the influential head of the English department, Stanley Fish, which was extreme even by academic standards of vitriol. Fish called NAS, and by implication its members, "racist, sexist and homophobic." "That," notes one of Barber's allies, "is like calling someone a communist in the McCarthy years."

Opponents of PC see themselves as a beleaguered minority among barbarians who would ban Shakespeare because he didn't write in Swahili. Outnumbered they may be on some campuses, but they are also often the most senior and influential people on their faculties. "We know who's in," says Martin Kilson, a black professor of government at Harvard - - "and it's not women or blacks. That's a damned lie!" And whenever the campus comes into conflict with the power structure of society, it's no contest. Last week a bureaucrat in the Department of Education jeopardized decades of progress in affirmative action by threatening the loss of federal funds to universities that award scholarships specifically for minority students (page 18).

But where the PC reigns, one defies it at one's peril. That was the experience of Prof. Vincent Sarich of the University of California, Berkeley, when he wrote in the alumni magazine that the university's affirmative-action program discriminated against white and Asian applicants. Seventy-five students marched into his anthropology class last month and drowned out his lecture with chants of "bullshit." His department began an investigation of his views and chancellor Chang-Lin Tien invited complaints from students about his lectures. Sarich was left in doubt whether he would be allowed to teach the introductory anthropology course he has taught off and on for 23 years.

Of course, Sarich was not entirely an innocent who blundered into the minefield of campus politics. He holds scientifically controversial views about the relationship of brain size to intelligence, which tend toward the politically unthinkable conclusion that some races could have a genetic edge in intellect. As an

anthropologist, Sarich knows exactly what happened to him: he stumbled on a taboo. "There are subjects you don't even talk or think about," Sarich says; among them, "race, gender [and] homosexuality."

Rude comments: It is not just wildly unfashionable views like Sarich's that are taboo. Students censor even the most ordinary of opinions. Nicole Stelle, a Stanford junior, spent this past semester working and studying in Washington, and found it easier to be a liberal in Republican Sen. Robert Dole's office than a conservative in Stanford. "If I was at lunch [in the dorm] and we started talking about something like civil rights, I'd get up and leave . . . I knew they didn't want to hear what I had to say."

PC is, strictly speaking, a totalitarian philosophy. No aspect of university life is too obscure to come under its scrutiny. The University of Connecticut issued a proclamation banning "inappropriately directed laughter" and "conspicuous exclusion of students from conversations." Did someone propose an alcohol-free "All-American Halloween Party" at Madison this fall? The majority faction in the Student Senate rose up in protest: masked students might take advantage of their anonymity to inflict "poking, pinching, rude comments" and suchlike oppressions on women and minorities. When the New York University Law School moot court board assigned a case on the custody rights of a lesbian mother, students forced its withdrawal. "Writing arguments [against the mother's side] is hurtful to a group of people and thus hurtful to all of us," one student wrote. To which Prof. Anthony Amsterdam responded: "The declaration that any legal issue is not an open question in law school is a declaration of war upon everything that a law school is." (The problem was reinstated.) At San Francisco State University, 30 students disrupted the first week of Prof. Robert Smith's course in black politics this fall. They weren't even angry about anything Smith said -- they just were upset that the course had been listed in the catalog under Political Science rather than Black Studies, which they viewed as an attack on SF State's Black Studies department.

One of the most controversial PC initiatives took place at the University of Texas at Austin, where the English faculty recently chose a new reading list for the freshman composition course, which is required for about half the entering undergraduates. Up till now, instructors had been free to assign essays on a range of topics for students to read and discuss. The revised course originally called for all readings to come from an anthology called "Racism and Sexism: An Integrated Study," by Paula S. Rothenberg. The selections, some of which are excellent, comprise a primer of PC thought. In the first chapter Rothenberg answers what many white men wonder but few dare ask: why are they the only ones ever accused of racism or sexism? The sine qua non of racism and sexism, Rothenberg explains, is subordination, which in Western society is exercised only by whites over blacks and men over women. Hence reverse racism and sexism by definition do not exist. Due to controversy, however, Rothenberg's book has since been replaced by a series of essays, poems and legal opinions dealing with racism and sexism. Prof. Alan Gribben was one of the minority who objected to this approach to teaching composition. He derided the course as "Oppression Studies." By dictating the content of the readings, he charged, the department "presumes that content is the most important thing about the writing course." But that is just the point: in the context of PC, political content is the most important thing about everything.

What are the underpinnings of this powerful movement, so seemingly at odds with what most Americans believe?

Philosophically, PC represents the subordination of the right to free speech to the guarantee of equal protection under the law. The absolutist position on the First Amendment is that it lets you slur anyone you choose. The PC position is that a hostile environment for minorities abridges their right to an equal education. "Sure you have the right to speech," says Kate Fahey, an associate dean at Mt. Holyoke College. "But I want to know: what is it going to do to our community? Is it going to damage us?" When a few students last spring mocked Mt. Holyoke's Lesbian/Bisexual Awareness Week by proclaiming "Heterosexual Awareness Week," president Elizabeth Kennan upbraided them for violating the spirit of

"community." Unfortunately for the "community," courts have generally held that highly restrictive speech codes are unconstitutional. The sociologist Ehrlich, who has written five books on racial prejudice, also considers them counterproductive. "You have to let students say the most outrageous and stupid things," he says. "To get people to think and talk, to question their own ideas, you don't regulate their speech."

Role models: But solicitude for minorities does not stop at shielding them from insults. Promotion of "diversity" is one of the central tents of PC. Accrediting bodies have even begun to make it a condition of accreditation. Diversity refers both to students and faculty. Of the 373 tenured professors at Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences, only two are black. The latest thinking holds that black undergraduates would be less likely to drop out if there were more black teachers available to act as mentors and role models, so the competition for qualified black professors is acute.

The Ford Foundation gave grants totaling \$ 1.6 million to 19 colleges and universities this year for "diversity." Tulane received a grant for a program "to focus the attention of . . . administration, faculty and students on the responsibility of each to welcome and encourage all members of the university community regardless of their race, gender, sexual orientation or religious beliefs." (Emphasis added.) That is a big responsibility. To political-science professor Paul Lewis, one of the 25 percent of the faculty who dissented from the university's draft "Initiatives for Race and Gender Enrichment," it implies a network of PC spies reporting to the "enrichment-liaison person" in each department. Could a bad grade be construed as failure to encourage? If you don't talk to a woman you dislike, are you guilty of not making her welcome? Tulane president Eamon Kelly calls Lewis's fears "foolishness."

Politically, PC is Marxist in origin, in the broad sense of attempting to redistribute power from the privileged class (white males) to the oppressed masses. But it is Marxism of a peculiarly attenuated, self-referential kind. This is not a movement aimed at attracting more working-class youths to the university. The failure of Marxist systems throughout the world has not noticeably dimmed the allure of left-wing politics for American academics. Even today, says David Littlejohn of Berkeley's Graduate School of Literature, "an overwhelming proportion of our courses are taught by people who really hate the system."

Intellectually, PC is informed by deconstructionism, a theory of literary criticism associated with the French thinker Jacques Derrida. This accounts for the concentration of PC thought in such seemingly unlikely discipline as comparative literature. Deconstructionism is a famously obscure theory, but one of its implications is a rejection of the notion of "hierarchy." It is impossible in deconstructionist terms to say that one text is superior to another. PC thinkers have embraced this conceit with a vengeance. "If you make any judgment or assessment as to the quality of a work, then somehow you aren't being an intellectual egalitarian," says Jean Bethke Elshtain, a political-science professor at Vanderbilt. At a conference recently she referred to Czeslaw Milosz's book "The Captive Mind" as "classic"; to which another female professor exclaimed in dismay that the word classic "makes me feel oppressed."

Age and beauty: It is not just in literary criticism that the PC rejects "hierarchy," but in the most mundane daily exchanges as well. A Smith College handout from the Office of Student Affairs lists 10 different kinds of oppression that can be inflicted by making judgments about people. These include "ageism -- oppression of the young and old by young adults and the middle-aged"; "heterosexism -- oppression of those of sexual orientations other than heterosexual . . . this can take place by not acknowledging their existence," and "lookism . . . construction of a standard for beauty/attractiveness." It's not sufficient to avoid discriminating against unattractive people; you must suppress the impulse to notice the difference. But the most Orwellian category may be "ableism -- oppression of the differently abled, by the temporarily able." "Differently abled" is a "term created to underline the concept that differently abled individuals are just that, not less or inferior in any way [as the terms disabled, handicapped, etc., imply]." Well, many people with handicaps surely do develop different abilities, but that is not what makes them a

category. They lack something other people possess, and while that is not a reason to oppress them, it does violence to logic and language to pretend otherwise. If people could choose, how many would be "differently abled"?

Sex change: It sometimes appears that the search for euphemisms has become the great intellectual challenge of American university life. Lest anyone take offense at being called "old," he or she becomes a "non-traditional-age student." Non-Caucasians generally are "people of color." This should never be confused with "colored people." Dennis Williams, who teaches writing at Cornell, recently wrote an article on affirmative action in which he tweaked the PC with the phrase "colored students." "Students of color sounds stupid," reasoned Williams, who is black. "As language, it's sloganeering. It's like saying 'jeans of blue'." He received no comments on the substance of his article, but he got many complaints about his language -- proving his point, that the form of language is taking precedence over its meaning. No one seems to have suggested renaming the sexes, although there is a movement to change the way they're spelled: in some circles the PC spelling is "womyn," without the "men."

The rejection of hierarchy underlies another key PC tenet, "multiculturalism." This is an attack on the primacy of the Western intellectual tradition, as handed down through centuries of "great books." In the PC view, this canon perpetuates the power of "dead white males" over women and blacks from beyond the grave. It obliges black students to revere the thoughts of Thomas Jefferson, who was a literal slave owner. In opposition to this "Eurocentric" view of the world, Molefi Asante, chairperson of African American studies at Temple, has proposed an "Afrocentric" curriculum. It would be based on the thoughts of ancient African scholars (he annexes Pharaonic Egypt for this purpose) and the little-known (to Americans) cultures of modern East and West Africa. This would be one of many such ethnic-specific curricula he foresees in a multicultural America. "There are only two positions," Asante says sweepingly; "either you support multiculturalism in American education, or you support the maintenance of white supremacy."

It is statements like that, of course, that sends members of the National Association of Scholars stomping into bookstores in a rage. To Stephen Balch, president of the organization, it is a dereliction of duty for educators to admit that every culture can be equally valid. Western civilization has earned its place at the center of the university curriculum, not by the accident that most university professors have been white males, but by its self-evident virtue. It has given rise to the single most compelling idea in human history, individual liberty, which as it happens is just now sweeping the entire world.

But Asante is proposing a change in values, not just reading lists. So what if the Western tradition gave rise to individual liberty? Is liberty necessarily a universal value? African cultures, he points out, exalt that familiar ideal: "community."

Right terms: "Community!" "Liberty!" Is there no way out of this impasse? Or are we doomed to an endless tug of war over words between the very people who should be leading us onward to a better life? If two people with as many degrees between them as Fish and Barber can't communicate except by hurtling charges of "racism" and knocking over books in a store, what hope is there for the rest of us? Yet one hears the same thing over and over: I don't know how to talk to African-Americans. I'm scared of saying the wrong thing to women. Whites don't listen. "There are times when I want to be very cautious about offending a feminist colleague, but I can't find the right terms," says Robert Caserio of the University of Utah. And Caserio is an English teacher. The great Harvard sociologist David Reisman recently complained about having to go to "great lengths to avoid the tag 'racist'." He wouldn't be annoyed to have to go to great lengths not to be anti-Semitic! Harvard's Kilson exploded. And Reisman was once Kilson's mentor!

Yes, of course conflict is inevitable, as the university makes the transition -- somewhat ahead of the rest of society -- toward its multiethnic future. There are in fact some who recognize the tyranny of PC, but see it only as a transitional phase, which will no longer be necessary once the virtues of tolerance are internalized. Does that sound familiar? It's the dictatorship of the proletariat, to be followed by the withering away of the state. These should be interesting years.

CORRECTION: (September 23, 1991)

In our cover story about politically correct thought on campus ("Taking Offense," IDEAS, Dec. 24, 1990), NEWSWEEK stated that "at Sarah Lawrence and a few other places the PC spelling is 'womyn,' without the 'men'." Though some individuals at the college may follow this practice, the school does not, in fact, endorse the alternative spelling of "women.". NEWSWEEK regrets the mistake and any embarrassment it may have caused the college.