

The Roots of Political Correctness

Over the last thirty years, political correctness has metastasized. Today, so many politically-correct assumptions have become mainstream that, as Tocqueville once predicted, they have narrowed our questions and our ability to question, rather than actually tell us the exact answers to things.

Over the last decade, it has become normal for students, professors, and the public at large to think of Western civilization as a term meaning, covertly and not so covertly, white supremacy or the mere history of white people. In many circles today, well beyond the intelligentsia, it has become commonplace to sneer when Western civilization is mentioned, as if we're really all in on the secret. Too clever. Too clever, by far.

Undoubtedly, these attacks – often known broadly as political correctness – stem from the Maoist and the New Leftist infiltration of Western society in the 1960s. Unlike the Stalinists and the Old Left, the New Left – often the actual biological children of the Old Left, a.k.a. “Red Diaper Babies” – understood that Marxist economic determinism had failed time and again, especially in a society as abundantly wealthy as that of America (even during the Great Depression, the economy continued to persevere, if only half-heartedly). Rather than rely on the supposed inevitable Marxist dialectic of history, the New Left understood that it must change things culturally if it were to have any real influence at all. As opposed to leading labor unions, they understood they must play the long game, hiding out in institutions that matter culturally, especially those in education and religion. The long game told them to ignore the present generation and begin to train the upcoming and forthcoming generations. By the

early 1980s, the New Left controlled much of academia (and the public schools, K-12).

This had been the plan since, at least, 1962, when the New Left formed around the ideas of Tom Hayden:

The university is located in a permanent position of social influence. Its educational function makes it indispensable and automatically makes it a crucial institution in the formation of social attitudes. Second, in an unbelievably complicated world, it is the central institution for organizing, evaluating and transmitting knowledge. Third, the extent to which academic resources presently are used to buttress immoral social practice is revealed, first, by the extent to which defense contracts make the universities engineers of the arms race. Too, the use of modern social science as a manipulative tool reveals itself in the 'human relations' consultants to the modern corporations, who introduce trivial sops to give laborers feelings of 'participation' or 'belonging,' while actually deluding them in order to further exploit their labor. And, of course, the use of motivational research is already infamous as a manipulative aspect of American politics. But these social uses of the universities' resources also demonstrate the unchangeable reliance by men of power on the men and storehouses of knowledge: this makes the university functionally tied to society in new ways, revealing new potentialities, new levers for change. Fourth, the university is the only mainstream institution that is open to participation by individuals of nearly any viewpoint.

In the meantime, political correctness – which had once been rightly considered so radical and authoritarian – was becoming mainstream. It did not lose its authoritarian element; instead, by gaining popularity among the students, it transformed into something totalitarian.

The Port Huron Statement of 1962 – the most realized voice of the New Left – made its desire to politicize all things well known.

In a participatory democracy, the political life would be based in several root principles: that decision-making of basic social consequence be carried on by public groupings;

that politics be seen positively, as the art of collectively creating an acceptable pattern of social relations; that politics has the function of bringing people out of isolation and into community, thus being a necessary, though not sufficient, means of finding meaning in personal life;

that the political order should serve to clarify problems in a way instrumental to their solution; it should provide outlets for the expression of personal grievance and aspiration; opposing views should be organized so as to illuminate choices and facilitate the attainment of goals; channels should be commonly available to relate men to knowledge and to power so that private problems – from bad recreation facilities to personal alienation – are formulated as general issues.

To be sure, the slow infiltration of politically-correct thinking and advocates into schooling alarmed only the most paranoid of Americans in the 1970s, with most understandably dismissing it as *Brave New World* and *1984* level fantasies.

Only by the time the New Left had succeeded in seeding most university departments and creating politicized scholarship in various “Studies” programs did conservatives become truly alarmed. By then, however, it was too late. Too late by far.

The first mockings of political correctness, nationally, came out in cartoons in the 1980s, mostly from Matt Groening (*Life is Hell* and *The Simpsons*), as well as from a then-clever undergraduate at Brown University, Jeff Shesol. By the early

1990s, writers such as Ray Bradbury, Margaret Atwood, and Camille Paglia were challenging it openly, often to the chagrin of their most ardent fans.

While my college was traditionally Catholic enough to mock most political correctness – at least among the student body – the professors were slowly changing even Notre Dame into something the faculty of the 1940s through 1960s would have found simply unrecognizable. That process has continued unabated over the thirty-plus years since I graduated. Most recently, of course, the administration painted over the gorgeous, nineteenth-century murals in the Golden Dome, celebrating the Catholic explorations and mission of Christopher Columbus. There are those, to be sure, at Notre Dame fighting the good fight, but they are, at best, holding the line.

In graduate school – at Indiana University-Bloomington – I first encountered the dreadfully dull and dreary political correctness of the New Left. Prior to IU, I had encountered a number of left-wing academics, but they had all been interesting, on fire, and ready to listen to a variety of viewpoints. Indeed, they still believed in free exchange and the free and open debate of ideas. At Indiana, though, I found something quite different. There, certain opinions – sometimes explicitly stated and sometimes implicitly – were becoming orthodox. Those students who defended them did so with sincerity but not verve. This became especially obvious when the politically-correct leftist debated an anarchist or a black power supremacist. Usually, the more radical tore apart the PC, recognizing intellectual weakness for what it was. The politically-correct of IU had become so comfortable in their own opinions that they failed to develop them with any serious standards. I found them boring, frankly, but pervasive. Few things can be duller than a number of similarly-minded folks sitting around a table for two-and-a-half hours to agree and disagree upon all of the same things... but to do so with what

could only be considered the Scandinavian white sauce of the culinary world!

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Is there a solution? Of course, but it will take immense time and work. The best thing the non-politically-correct have on their side is complexity and density of argument. What is politically correct has become so by lackluster thinking. It can be demolished, easily, but it will take time to undo all that has been done. As Ray Bradbury argued in the early 1990s, political correctness must be defeated the moment it is expressed. Not two days or even two minutes later. It is a form of conformist bullying, and, like all bullying, it collapses when confronted and challenged.

Additionally, many (if not all) of the ideas the PC crowd has advanced – such as diversity (which, in nature, is a good and positive thing) – could be better served by merely exercising traditional manners, restraining one's passions; and possessing intellectual integrity.

Again, it won't be easy, but it can be done. If so, it starts here and now.

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