

EDITORIAL: THE CULTURE WARS

The rhetorical tone surrounding the current furor over “political correctness” has been shrill and overblown even by the standards of the glossy infotainment magazines which crowd our newsstands. Our colleges and universities, we are told, are being overrun by a new fundamentalism, a new McCarthyism, even a new totalitarianism. A *Newsweek* cover story concluded by likening the “tyranny of PC” to the dictatorship of the proletariat and *New York*’s contribution to the debate featured photos of the Chinese Red Guards and book-burning Nazi youths. At stake, apparently, is American education, free speech, democracy, and the very future of Western civilization. Some of the more serious journals of opinion have joined the fray with somewhat less hyperbolic but equally hostile polemics against the “multicultural cult” supposedly advanced by the politically correct. This periodical literature has supplemented a trio of books (Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*, Roger Kimball’s *Tenured Radicals*, and Dinesh D’Souza’s *Illiberal Education*) attacking, from various angles, an imagined takeover of the academy by an insidious coalition of feminists, Marxists, gays, African-Americans and various left-leaning faculty members and administrators. In fact, the university, while hardly dominated by radicals, is perhaps the last sector of American life where the left has some significant presence. Even this small influence is too much for those intent on purging this country of all elements of progressive thought and action.

These attacks on academic multiculturalism indiscriminately conflate and vilify under the “PC” label a considerable diversity of ideas, issues, and movements (from literary deconstruction to date rape to gay student organizations), but three broad sites of conflict can be identified: faculty hiring and student admissions, curriculum revision, and the codes and customs of campus life. Affirmative action policies designed to redress the traditional exclusion of women and minorities from faculties and student bodies are criticized for substituting quotas for considerations of merit. Efforts to insure that curricula represent the cultural achievements of Africa, Asia and Latin America are perceived as diluting what should be an emphasis on Western civilization. Attempts to create a campus environment where students are free from harassment on the basis

of race, gender, or sexual orientation are opposed on First Amendment grounds.

Common to many of the critiques of multiculturalism is the complaint that higher education in the United States is becoming increasingly politicized. Counterposed to the diverse and contentious place that the academy has become is an idealized image of the pre-1960s university where, high above the turmoil of politics, eager students were initiated into the system of universal values and timeless truths comprising the core of Western culture. Of course, the reality behind this idyllic image is that until well after World War II the student bodies and faculties of most American institutions of higher education were overwhelmingly white, male, Christian, and middle to upper class. Those today who complain of preferential admission policies for minority students ignore the fact that historically college admissions have been based not solely on merit, but on race, religion, ethnicity, gender, class, and family background. Not surprisingly the traditional curriculum of the American university reflected the homogeneity of the campus population. As women and minorities made gradual and hard-won progress on social, political, and economic fronts their presence in higher education increased. Quite naturally they have struggled to make the curriculum more representative of the multicultural diversity of both the contemporary United States and the world, as they have fought to make the campus a more hospitable environment for its newly heterogeneous population. Just as naturally those whose values and interests have traditionally been embodied in academic culture have fought to maintain the status quo. However, the status quo, whether that of the academy or the wider social world, is rarely perceived as representing a very particular, historically contingent set of socio-political arrangements. The ubiquitousness of the assumptions of the existing social system renders it an invisible natural fact, such as the air we breathe. When movements emerge—such as those aiming to reform academic culture—which radically challenge political, economic, or cultural orthodoxies their visibility is dramatic by contrast and they are immediately perceived and derided as being “ideological.”

One of the most remarkable and irritating aspects of the whole PC controversy is the way that the opponents of multiculturalism have attempted to portray themselves as being without ideology or political partisanship and as being motivated by nothing less noble

than the custodianship of civilized standards and democratic values. Meanwhile those on the left are treated as nihilists or fanatical ideologues as if objecting to fraternities staging mock slave auctions or arguing that Wollstonecraft and Hurston belong alongside Coleridge and Hemingway on college reading lists is tantamount to trashing the First Amendment and defiling intellectual standards. To be sure, the left has its share of self-righteousness, zealotry, intolerance, and plain silliness, but are these qualities restricted to only one end of the political spectrum? Instead of meaningfully addressing the pressing issues of racism, sexism, and class inequities, the assailants of multiculturalism focus their energies on the occasional excesses, real or imagined, of those trying to do something about these problems. Of course, there are those in the multicultural camp who have yet to learn that purifying language or adopting a radical posture is no substitute for the hard work of critical thought and political action. The real danger to American society, however, is not in the lapses of people trying to promote social and cultural change, but in the ways in which the discrimination and inequality against which they are fighting are ingrained in our institutions.

This debate over political correctness and multiculturalism should be of more than passing interest to librarians not only because our profession involves us closely with education and intellectual culture, but because librarianship has its own version of the PC wars. The current uproar over efforts to get ALA members to take progressive positions on international issues (South Africa, Israel), to implement a Poor Peoples Policy and to challenge the Columbus Quincentennial celebrations, points to the likelihood that virtually *any* attempts to critically examine library matters as they connect with broader social currents will likely be resisted on the grounds that politics and librarianship shouldn't mix. If, however, insisting that library staffs and collections reflect the diversity of American culture, if redressing the mainstream bias in our collections by fighting for the presence of material from the "alternative" US and international press, if promoting access to library meeting rooms and exhibit spaces for controversy and debate, and if demanding that the information needs, for example, of workers and labor organizations be given the same attention as presently given to business, are denounced as politically correct, then so be it.

As protest against the so-called tyranny of “political correctness” in our educational institutions engages a wider audience, those of us who insist on exploring the relationship between information, knowledge, and power as it expresses itself in library and society will inevitably be tarred with the PC brush. But we, like our counterparts in the field of education, journalism, the arts, etc., must recognize that what is at stake is more than malicious name-calling. Behind the anti-PC campaign is the political agenda of those who would halt and reverse the momentum of cultural democratization in America and re-impose the old uniformity, intolerance and chauvinism on our institutions. One can anticipate as well that the effects of this campaign will not be confined to the halls of academe for long as the flap over political correctness begins to fuel the passions of right-wing book-burning types, anti-abortion fanatics and assorted bigots.

The editors of *Progressive Librarian* therefore applaud and endorse the initiative taken by a group of prominent academics including Henry Louis Gates, Stanley Fish and Wayne Booth in organizing Teachers for a Democratic Culture, an organization which is outspokenly challenging the “mischievous misinterpretations” promoted by the anti-PC squad. Along with them we “support the right of scholars and teachers to raise questions about the relations of culture, scholarship, and education to politics — not in order to shut down debate on such issues, but to open it.”

We believe librarians have an obligation to widen and invigorate a “public sphere” of discourse. We must therefore make sure that, in our own field, controversy over the parameters of a democratic culture is not muted by fear of the snide—and dishonest—epithet “PC.”