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“The Role of the Right— A Focus on the ‘Political’ in ‘Political Correctness’”

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THE issue of PC, or political correctness, has commanded a great deal of national attention throughout the 1990s. All of the national newsweeklies—*U.S. News, Time,* and *Newsweek*—as well as virtually every other publication outlet of note has carried a piece denouncing PC as some leftist threat. Indeed, PC is most often defined or characterized as a well orchestrated leftist campaign, designed to suppress any expression that might be sexist, racist, or anti-gay. Anyone who has taken the opportunity to examine the coverage of PC in the mainstream media could easily find, as I have discovered, that much of that coverage portrays an image of some left-wing tyranny that will kick sexism and racism out of the academy with liberal jackboots. In fact, this threat of leftist tyranny is most often associated with political efforts on our nation’s college and university campuses: “From Ivy League to community college—so the storytellers claim—leftists, radicals, feminists, and angry people of color had seized the wheels of higher education” (Diamond, 1993, p. 30). When students and instructors talk about PC, I typically hear them refer to “thought police”, “language Nazis”, and other such figures.

There is most certainly a political element to political correctness. That political element is not, however, the exclusive terrain of the left. Right-wing critics of PC also play a significant role in the unfolding drama of political correctness. Indeed, it would be naive to assume that the flood of anti-PC criticism is merely the by-product of objective journalism. Much of the anti-PC rhetoric appears to be generated by political forces on the right. Many conservative critics of PC reflect the views of more rigidly political right-wing groups, employ hyperbole and generalization in their assessments of what is actually happening on college and university campuses, and contribute to the political correctness debate as clearly, or even more so, than any element on the left.

PC has become a convenient target for the right. Many right-wing political elements feared the erosion of their influence as the Cold War drew to a close. "Communism" had been a popular unifying theme for the right for nearly half a century, and they clearly would need another focal point of attack and a rallying point for their followers. Some right-wing groups have found sex education, some have been fortunate enough to stumble upon public dissatisfaction with affirmative action, while others have found the leftist demon of PC. The right has fueled the fires of the PC debate with political support and has influenced much of the media coverage on the issue. Indeed, if one were to believe the bulk of what is written regarding PC you would soon expect to see the collapse of the family, free speech, western civilization, "and everything else that Americans allegedly hold dear—particularly on the campuses of the nation's elite universities" (O'Sullivan, 1991, p. 45).

The conservative opposition to political correctness is no random, unsophisticated operation. In fact, the anti-PC efforts of the political right are both skillfully organized and very well funded. O'Sullivan (1991) has demonstrated the extent of this effort:

Behind the current campaign against political correctness is a heavily funded network of right-wing think-tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, The American Enterprise Institute, the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, and the Institute for Educational Affairs fueled with money from friendly donors like the Olin and Smith Richardson Foundations. The latter is particularly noteworthy. In the past, the Smith Richardson Foundation has given \$65,000 to the pro-contra institute for religion and democracy and it has also funded such right-wing projects as a television documentary entitled "Two Cheers for the CIA" (p. 45).

The contras and the CIA have never been known as neutral, objective forces, yet some anti-PC elements have connections to the promotion of both. It would be difficult to prove that all of the anti-PC criticism one hears is organized and funded by such right-wing heavyweights, but it seems that such forces would naturally look for opportunities to join in the assault on political correctness.

The role of a conservative political elite may well go beyond funding. Dinesh D'Souza, who became the "poster child" of the anti-PC movement with publication of his book *Illiberal Education* is a good case in point. D'Souza is a Dartmouth educated conservative idealist who has worked for the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Reagan administration. A piece in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* offered this note:

"Jay Parini, a professor of English at Middlebury College, says Mr. D'Souza was once a student of his in a creative writing class and calls him an "extremely fluent" writer. However he says, *Illiberal Education* is utterly crazy and entirely derivative." The book, he adds, is "simply a recitation of neoconservative grievances." (Magner, 1991, p. A3)

I often observe other former Reagan and Bush administration officials offering their support for the struggle against PC in a similar manner.

One of the most powerful instruments of the anti-PC right is a collection of conservative educators called the National Association of Scholars (NAS). The NAS has been employed by the right as a mechanism for the establishment of an aura of academic respectability for their efforts. The NAS boasts nearly 3,000 members, organized into a network of 29 state affiliates (Diamond, 1993, p. 30). The NAS has an impressive collection of respectable conservative figureheads: "Gracing the NAS advisory board is an array of prominent neoconservative intellectuals, including Jeanne Kirkpatrick, Irving Kyristol, Seymour

Martin Lipset, and John Bunzel" (Diamond, 1993, p. 30). The NAS maintains affiliated groups serving the academic spectrum from the Ivy league to many community colleges.

Each time I encounter someone affiliated with the NAS they seem to be following "the party line" on the issue of PC. They typically argue that PC is a threat to free speech produced by some abstract collection of leftist forces. Such a view by the NAS should not be surprising. As noted, a large collection of conservative figureheads graces its organizational hierarchy and the NAS supports conservative campus newspapers and receives much of its funding from prominent conservative foundations. The NAS may not be an instrument designed by the right to lead the scholarly attack against PC, it is, however, clearly connected to the right-wing establishment and does often serve as a springboard for assaults against political correctness.

Reports about PC tend to focus on an atypical collection of extreme incidents. Most arguments posited by the right in media outlets follow a similar pattern of drawing upon a body of outrageous examples. Many PC critics paint a vivid picture of a broad threat from politically correct thought police, and "then display their evidence of this new fascism—bizarre, isolated incidents that in themselves may be troubling, but in total don't add up to a multicultural conspiracy" (Fraser, 1991, p. 7). There is agreement that the scope of PC has been exaggerated by most conservative reactionaries and in the popular media (Alter, 1993). The bulk of mainstream media coverage of PC has been no more than an exercise in hyperbole. The anti-PC evidence appears to me to be anecdotal and packed with conservative catch phrases.

What objective evidence exists suggests that political correctness does not pose an imminent threat to the academy or society as a whole. One reporter who focuses on what is happening in the academy, for example, has recently confirmed that there is a "lull" in PC activity (Mooney, 1993, p. A15). Another source has reported that the politically correct movement is not extensive on the nation's campuses (Neikins, 1991, p. 4). A campus correspondent has written that the PC movement has "come and gone" (Long, 1991, p. M3). The much respected Michael Kingsley (1991) reported that "after wading through much of the anecdotal PC hysteria, my own conclusion is that very little of it supports the charge that anyone's right of free expression is being stifled, let alone that there is a reign of terror on campus" (p. A25). Indeed, "like communists during the McCarthy era, people who actually profess 'political correctness' are not so easy to find..." (The PC Scare", 1991, p. 15).

My own impression is that political correctness is, indeed, more hyperbole than actual threat. I also do think that it is important to recognize that the discussion and debate regarding PC is not dominated solely by elements of the left guarding against sexism and racism on college campuses. The political right also plays a role in stirring up concern about the "threat" of PC and in providing resources for anti-PC elements.

A recognition that both the left and right play a significant political role in regard to PC should be important to communication instructors and administrators. There are a number of communication-relevant questions inherent to PC: What power do words actually have? Can language be guided by regulation? And, how should students be encouraged to talk about differences and diversity? These are all questions which should be of interest to the communication discipline. Communication administrators may also be confronted with the need to make decisions about hate speech codes and appropriate language guidelines, two regulatory issues which often accompany the PC debate. And, the fact that there is an on-going debate—with heated discourse from both left and right—should be of central concern to communication administrators. Those who steer the ship of state for the communication discipline should be aware that the debate is not a one-sided affair. If the left had contributed to the promotion of PC, the right has done just as much to counter that effort. Communication administrators can use such knowledge to play a more reasoned part when cast as a character in the PC drama.

REFERENCES AND NOTES

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