

# Radical Theory, Radical Teaching: Multiculturalism in American Universities

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Europeans have always had good reasons to think that the United States of America is an extension of Europe, at least spiritually. It is mainly because the white population of that country has roots in Europe, which means that their culture has a European background as well. Due to its economic and military power, cultural, technological and scientific innovations the United States has become the stronghold of the West, and is considered so in other parts of the world as well.

It might be a surprise to those who consider the US as a symbol of the West that influential intellectual trends are emerging in that country today which challenge the western cultural tradition and its aesthetic values, seeking to radically reevaluate the history of the country, and reform the curricula of high schools and colleges accordingly. The ensuing debates in American universities and the academic community at large over the canon of works that undergraduates should study, over issues involving race and gender and over new forms of literary criticism are all linked by the assumption that Western values are inherently oppressive, that the chief purpose of education is political transformation, and that all standards are arbitrary. This assumption is expressed in

the key-concepts of the debate which are *multiculturalism* (MC) that has replaced the former popular notion of the *melting pot*. and *political correctness* (PC) favored in discourse over the freedom of expression.

This paper attempts to outline and evaluate some aspects of the ongoing cultural and political debate on American campuses as reflected in both the press and professional literature, and conjectured from personal interviews with academics and faculty members.

### Literary Revisionism and Cultural Studies

Among different fields of scholarship that have been exposed to uncompromising revisionism in the US during the last decades literary criticism seems to stand out most conspicuously. Traditionally, literary criticism has approached the notion of literary excellence as a matter of assumed standards of judgment, based on the notion of the supposedly objective criteria for aesthetic evaluation and of inherent textual meaning. Its followers believed that if a work survives the scrutiny of serious minds over generations it is a true classic and its reputation is protected: time destroys the worst and leaves the best, and time will do this, apparently, without any help from literary critics. Therefore the function of literary criticism was to illuminate the work, not to interpret it.

In the sphere of education this position has led to certain traditional assumptions about the daily practices of English departments (reflected in the courses, syllabi, tests, degree requirements, and hiring policies): that such departments have a basically curatorial (not socially conscious) mission; that this mission centers on certain widely taught belletristic works conveniently organized by periods and genres; and that people with traditional Ph.D.s have the clearest views of this Grand Canon.

However, the 1980s witnessed various new developments in literary theory and related fields that have produced quite radical disruptions in the discipline of literary studies, involving a thoroughgoing sceptical scrutiny of some of its most characteristic practices, objectives, and claims. Much modern literary criticism, starting from the middle of this century (such schools as formalism, hermeneutics, semiotics, structural-

ism, psychoanalytic criticism, Marxism, deconstructionism) are based on the denial of inherent textual meaning and unite in general effort to hand over semantic authority to an interpreter. The followers of the modern schools of criticism have explicitly or implicitly proclaimed their emancipation from their bondage as servants of texts and have claimed a primary status for their own discourses. Not only has the traditional project of determining any presumptive defining properties of literature been abandoned, but the contents, structure and orthodox justifications of the traditional literary canon—that is, the academy's own assemblage of privileged texts under that label—have been decisively unsettled. These critics have addressed the socio-political factors involved in the initial establishment of literary reputations and in the present evaluation of past writers. The very nature of the literary text as an isolatable or aesthetic object has been seriously brought into question.

In self-conscious opposition to circumscribed formalist and poststructuralist modes of inquiry, academic leftist critics were determined to situate aesthetic phenomena and artifacts in relation to both social foundations and other cultural works. This project required not only textual analysis, but also investigations into the economic, political, social, institutional, and historical grounds of cultural production, distribution and consumption. Accordingly, they increasingly advocated totalizing modes of examination and wide-ranging programs of cultural studies. Interdisciplinarity that has long been a familiar word in discussions of education and pedagogy, acquired a new force and urgency, as it appeared as an agenda flowing from the imperatives of left culturalist theory.

Stanley Fish, one of the key figures in literary revisionism, has pointed out that whereas in the classical liberal paradigm, interdisciplinary studies seek only to transform the academy while maintaining the wall between it and the larger field of social action, the radical interdisciplinarity begins with the assumption that the political is always and already inside those precincts and that the line separating them from the arena of social agitation is itself politically drawn and must be erased if action within the academy is to be continuous with the larger struggle against exploitation and oppression. The epistemology that usually accompanies this radical vision is either deconstructive or psychoanalytic or a combination of the two, and in any of its forms its thesis is that meanings do not exist as such (that is, as freestanding and natural enti-

ties) but are produced. It follows, says Stanley Fish, that rather than teach meanings we must undo the meanings offered to us by hidden ideological agendas, poking holes in the discursive fabric those agendas weave."<sup>1</sup>

The classroom, states Jeffrey Peck, then becomes a productive rather than a reproductive environment. In the spirit of critical reflection meanings and values of traditional pedagogy can be scrutinized. The intersubjectivity of meaning can be exposed, and educational institutions, the classroom, the discipline and the university can be seen to construct and condition knowledge. In this way literary study, as the study of textuality, reveals the epistemological structures that organize how we know, how our knowledge gets transmitted and accepted, and why and how students receive it.<sup>2</sup>

From the sixties through the eighties the scope of critical inquiry has been dramatically expanded and the concept of literature significantly broadened. In the sixties, for instance, women's texts were incorporated into the curriculum, followed by popular culture and working class literature. Out of the critique of the canon many new programs and syllabi have been developed, familiar to the academy now as the curricular innovations of such minority-studies programs as Women's Studies or African-American studies. By the early eighties, the leftist project of redefining literature and reconceptualizing criticism took on the broadly accepted nickname cultural studies.

The new graduate program in literature introduced in Duke University two years ago is a perfect example of the new conception of literary/cultural studies. The Chairman of the Program, Fredric Jameson, a Marxist literary theorist, sees the new scholarship as consistent with his mission: "to create a Marxist culture in this country, to make Marxism an unavoidable presence in American social, cultural and intellectual life, in short to form a Marxist intelligentsia for the struggles of the future."<sup>3</sup> The Program, says Jameson, is dedicated to the understanding of cultural history and the reshaping of literary studies in the context of contemporary thought.

1 Stanley Fish, "Being Interdisciplinary Is So Very Hard to Do," *Profession* (New York: Modern Language Association, 1989), p. 15-22.

2 Jeffrey Peck, "Advanced Literary Study as Cultural Study: A Redefinition of the Discipline," *Profession* 85 (New York: Modern Language Association, 1985), p. 51.

3 In: Dinesh D'Souza, "Illiberal Education," *The Atlantic Monthly* (March 1991), p. 76.

The introduction to the Program reads: "Given the immense social and geopolitical changes that have occurred in the last few decades affecting the organization of the traditional disciplines, altering the status of the arts in Western cultures, and challenging Western aesthetic values by global concerns, what we have traditionally called "literature" is no longer a stable concept. The Literature Program acknowledges the challenges posed by the emergence of non-Western literatures and also by the increasing importance of non-canonical, marginal or oppositional cultures within the West. The liveliest theories or approaches today—feminism, Marxism, discourse analysis, the stress on reader-response and interpretive communities, the analysis of power and the focus on the social function of ritual and symbolic action—have in large part arisen in opposition to perceived exclusions in traditional literary studies, or to their isolation from other kinds of thought and action."<sup>4</sup> The Program is therefore dedicated to the understanding of cultural history and the reshaping of literary studies in the context of contemporary thought and is aimed at encouraging students to explore the connections between literary study and innovations in other disciplines—anthropology, psychoanalysis, linguistics, sociology, law—which already share some of literature's investment in narrativity, structure, communication and interpretation and to reincorporate their findings into literary discipline.

We can get a sense of the radical nature of the new program by comparing it to the traditional English curriculum. A Duke catalogue from 1960-1961 describes English Department courses on composition, persuasive speaking and argumentation, Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, and American literature from 1800 to 1920. The courses offered for Fall 1991 include topics like "Love, Marriage and Adultery in the 19th Century Novel," "Women in Arab Literature," "Biological Issues in Cultural Theory," "Literature and Ideology: Literature of German Democratic Republic," "or Third World and Postcolonial Fiction." The Program obviously answers the demands of modern multicultural education, that is, schooling which recognizes the internal multiplicity of American culture.

<sup>4</sup> The Graduate Program in Literature (Duke University, 1990).

### The Politics of Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is a radical opposition to the melting-pot ideology of the previous years, which was based on the assumption that whatever cultural, racial or ethnic differences American citizens bore, they were all contributing to the amalgam called the American character, the American culture, the American way of life.

As Fred Siegel explains in his article "The Cult of Multiculturalism," the multiculturalists begin with a very different premise that it is important to recognize and to celebrate the wide range of cultures that cohabit in the United States.<sup>5</sup> They argue that differences must be recognized, and that differences are legitimate. In its softer versions, multiculturalism represents the discovery on the part of minority groups that they can play a role in molding the larger culture even as they are molded by it. Debate on campus multiculturalism, defined as the need to recognize cultural variations among students, has tried with some success to talk about how a racially and ethnically diverse student body can enrich everyone's education. But multiculturalism's hard-liners, Siegel asserts, who seem to make up the majority of the movement, damn as racist any attempt to draw the myriad of American groups into a common American culture. For these multiculturalists, differences are absolute, irreducible, intractable—occasions not for understanding but for separation. The American mixture of assimilation and traditional allegiance is denounced as a danger to racial and gender authenticity.

This is an extraordinary reversal of the traditional liberal commitment to a truth that transcends parochialisms. The multiculturalists insist on seeing all perspectives as tainted by the perceiver's particular point of view. Impartial knowledge, they argue, is not possible, because ideas are simply the expression of individual identity, or of the unspoken but inescapable assumptions that are inscribed in a culture or a language. This threatens to leave no ground for anybody to stand on. To survive epistemologically, the multiculturalists make a leap and proceed to argue that there are some categories, such as race and gender, that do in fact embody an unmistakable knowledge of oppression. Victims are at least epistemologically lucky. Objectivity is a mask for oppression. Multiculturalists attack the standard conceptual distinctions between

5.Fred Siegel, "The Cull of Multiculturalism," *The New Republic*(February 18, 1991). pp. 34-40.

rational/irrational, white/black, healthy/sick, male/female, history/myth, literacy/illiteracy as hidden expressions of a hierarchy designed to "privilege" the first half of the paired categories. But there is an irony here, Siegel points out. What begins as an attempt to expand our mental horizons ends up by giving the second half of the pairing superior standing and a rightful claim to power. None of the reversals is as sad, as ridiculous, or as dangerous as the white/black reversal, wherein Herodotus and other ancient writers are combed for all references to North African persons and events, and the myth of the African origins of all civilization displaces the conventional history of the Greek origins of Western culture, claims Siegel.

According to Siegel, multiculturalism is a profoundly American phenomenon that owes a great deal to the changes in American intellectual life introduced in the 1960s. While listening to the multiculturalists one cannot but hear echoes of the views of Eldridge Cleaver (that European civilization was simply a form of domination), of R. D. Laing (his critique of Western rationalism), and Herbert Marcuse (his contempt for free speech and free thought as forms of repressive tolerance). We are again witnessing the growth of campus radicalism. In the 1960s it postulated an all-powerful Establishment out to crush racial minorities, women, and the poor. Now the locus of the Establishment has changed. Today the villainy resides in the so-called canonical texts of Western civilization.

The academic and cultural revolution on campus, explains Dinesh D'Souza in his article "Illiberal Education," is conducted in the name of those who suffer from the effects of race and gender discrimination in America, or from the effects of Western colonialism in the Third World. It is a revolution in behalf of minority victims. Its mission is to put an end to bigoted attitudes that permit perceived social injustice to continue, to rectify past and present inequities, and to advance the interests of the previously disenfranchised—unobjectionable aims, to be sure. But because the revolutionaries view xenophobia, racism, sexism, and other prejudices to be endemic and culturally sanctioned, their project seeks a fundamental restructuring of American society. It involves basic changes in the way economic rewards are distributed, and in the way cultural and political power is exercised.

"What Every American Needs to Know"

Today most university presidents and deans cooperate with the project to transform liberal education in the name of minority victims. This group is said to include an overwhelming majority of the presidents of state universities and Ivy League schools. However, the last few years have been marked by an escalation in the antirevisionist assault by conservative and liberal politicians, journalists and scholars on the curriculum reform. In 1988 the National Association of Scholars was founded with the declared purpose "to redeem American higher education from intellectual and moral servitude to forces having little to do with the life of the mind or the transmission of knowledge." In a variety of newspaper articles the supporters of "revisionism" have been accused of writing "covert leftwing propaganda" instead of "traditional history," of satisfying "the partisan ideological assumptions of radical and minority groups," of compacting "the world's great literature to fit their coarse and ham-fisted political framework." Clearly an anti-revisionist, D'Souza argues that "the new critics go beyond the assertion of contingent knowledge to suggest that the very ideal of objectivity is a mirage, and that it is therefore perfectly legitimate for teachers to cast aside pretensions of impartiality and to impose their politically preferred ideas on students. When the traditional norms of scholarship no longer reign in the instinct for activism, licence is given for uninhibited ideological proselytizing."<sup>6</sup>

Here, a supporter of revisionism would point out that this line of argument ignores the leftist claim that the writing and teaching of traditional history as well as of many other subjects, including literature—have often embodied covert right-wing propaganda. Thus the leftists view their enterprise as an academically legitimate corrective. "The Marxist theory of ideological hegemony holds that the political status quo is most effectively maintained through the unconscious assumption, permeating every aspect of culture, that the interests of those in power are those of society as a whole and are hence above partisanship," argues Donald Lazere. "Thus leftists attempt to show that claims of non-partisanship in literature and scholarship, as well as in government and mass media, often are not only self-deluded but effective in delegitimizing

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 76



ing views outside the ideological consensus. This attempt, however, gets stood on its head by conservatives ... who claim that it is the leftists who are trying to impose their ideology to the exclusion of all others, rather than merely trying to counteract its exclusion and to point out the blind spots in the dominant ideology that impede objective, critical thinking about the status quo."<sup>7</sup> However, Lazere himself is cautious enough to further admit that "there are, to be sure, offensively dogmatic leftists; they unfortunately discredit the more responsible ones."<sup>8</sup>

The main focus of the argument, though, has been on "the disappearance of a common curriculum in many of the nation's colleges and universities, and the resulting failure of many students to acquire ... even a rudimentary knowledge of the civilization of which they are both products and heirs," as stated by the then Secretary of Education William J. Bennett.<sup>9</sup> The right-wing academics warned that the extreme claims of minority groups "risk undermining any aspiration to common standards and a common culture, including a common ideal of justice, and without some semblance of a collective culture and of common ideals, we are left without a common basis from which to defend the claims of the individual against oppression."<sup>10</sup>

The most problematic task the supporters of "common culture" had to face was to define the contents of the category "common." The first notable attempt was made by E. D. Hirsch. In *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* Hirsch introduced the notion of a "national culture" and set up his argument for a uniform national school curriculum based on the list of terms and phrases, followed by "sets of associations" meant to equip every child in the country with a putatively finite, determinate, measurable store of basic "American knowledge." By this he means the allegedly "common," "traditional" information, attitudes and values shared by all literate Americans. Fixing the vocabulary of a national culture is analogous to fixing a standard grammar, spelling and pronunciation, explains Hirsch. Americans "need to learn not just the associations of such words as to run, but also the associations of such terms as Teddy Roosevelt, DNA and Hamlet."<sup>11</sup>

7 Donald Lazere, "Literary Revisionism, Partisan Politics, and the Press," *Profession* 89, p. 52.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 53.

9 William J. Bennett, *National Forum* (Summer, 1989), p. 3.

10 E. Fox-Genovese, *National Forum* (Summer, 1989), p. 34.

11 E.D. Hirsch, *Cultural Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know* (Boston. 1987), p. 84

Hirsch's vision has been met with grave scepticism by the supporters of multicultural education. For instance, Barbara Herrnstein Smith has stressed the heterogeneous nature of the American society where "every citizen ... belongs to numerous communities (regional, ethnic, religious, occupational etc.) and shares different sets of beliefs, interests, assumptions, attitudes and practices - and in that sense, cultures—with the other members of each of those communities." "She maintained that "there is ... no single, comprehensive macroculture in which all or even most of the citizens of this nation actually participate, no numerically preponderant majority culture that, in Hirsch's term, 'transcends' any or all other cultures."<sup>13</sup> Therefore, what Hirsch refers to as "national culture" and exemplifies by his list, is "nothing but a particular ... set of items of 'knowledge' that Hirsch himself privileges and that he wants the state educational system to make 'standard.'"<sup>14</sup>

Similarly, Stanley Fish told one of the authors that expressions like "collective culture" and "common curriculum" suggest the specter of state control and the imposition of standards on the very individuals on behalf of whom the establishment of the common is urged. The common, he maintained, is a political category; its content will vary with the varying perspectives of those who assert it. Therefore any institutionalization of the so-called common will be a political imposition.

As we see from this debate, those on the right confidently proclaim their (or "established") common as everyone's and then consign everything outside it to the waste-basket of the peripheral or inessential; they do not take difference seriously as an irreducible feature of perception and judgment, but assume that it can be non-controversially identified and left to the care of "grandparents, of neighborhoods and churches." The left, on the other hand, takes differences too seriously and ends up denying it from the other direction, not by marginalizing it but by celebrating it. "Teach the conflicts," argues Gerald Graff, by which he means structuring the curriculum around conflicts rather than concealing them in the folds of some desperate and doomed "unification program"<sup>15</sup> The question to be asked here is: does the introduction into the

12 Barbara Herrnstein Smith, "Cult-Lit Hirsch, Literacy, and the National Culture," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* (Spring 1988), p 71

13 *Ibid.*, p 71

14 *Ibid.*, p 72

15 Gerald Graff *National Forum* (Summer, 1989), p 9

curriculum of new controversial names and approaches guarantee tolerance, openness and flexibility? The on-going heated and uncompromising debate in American campuses as well as the emergence of the expression *politically correct* have left the authors yet in some doubt as to the positive answer.

### MC and PC in Daily Life of American Universities

Each fall some 13 million students, 2.5 million of them members of minority groups, enroll in American colleges. At university they hope to shape themselves as whole human beings, to prepare themselves for full and independent lives in the work place, at home, and as citizens of a democratic society. But, as Dinesh D'Souza stresses, instead of liberal education many American students are getting its opposite: an education in closed-mindedness and intolerance.<sup>16</sup> Many efforts seem to lead where nobody expected them to. Instead of integration one is getting segregation, instead of equal respect for different views one finds intolerance and hatred. Let us consider, as the most obvious example, the ideology of *political correctness* (PC) which designates various ways of imposing multiculturalism on campus. According to one American author, PC is fast becoming the unofficial ideology of universities across the country.<sup>17</sup> PC has become so well-known that it has made its appearance in the official chronicle of American culture, the comic pages. The partisans of PC try to impose a new code of behavior and public speech upon academic communities. As Jerry B. Hough, a well-known American political scientist, explained to one of the authors, PC is an ironic description of certain left-wing views by liberally minded intellectuals. For that reason it is often put into inverted commas. PC-ness focuses on issues of race, gender, age and sexual preferences, or more exactly, how to communicate about these issues without insulting the people concerned. PC canon seeks to put people of different races, ages, genders and sexual preferences on equal footing, first of all, in

<sup>16</sup> Dinesh D. Souza, p. 79.

<sup>17</sup> Jason Judd, "Political Correctness: An Insult to Liberal Philosophy and Independent Thought," Duke Blue (Vol. 2, no. 3, Winter 1990), p. 28.

public discourse about them.

*Newsweek* comments on a college handout which 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 middleaged;" "heterosexism—oppression of those of sexual orientations other than heterosexual ... this can take place by not acknowledging their existence;" "lookism ... construction of a standard for beauty/attractiveness" (it is not sufficient to avoid discriminating against unattractive people, one must suppress the impulse to notice the difference); "ableism—oppression of the differently abled, by the temporarily able." "Differently abled" stands for "disabled" or "handicapped," this is a term created to underline the concept that differently abled individuals are just that, not less or inferior in any way. The search for euphemisms has become an important element in PC. Lest anyone take offence at being called "old," he or she becomes a "non-traditional-age student." Nobody has seriously attempted to rename the sexes, however, there is a movement to change the way they are spelled: the PC spelling is "womyn," without the "men."<sup>18</sup>

In some colleges special anti-racism seminars are taking place. As Jacob Weisberg reports from Oberlin College, he participated in the session called "Fighting Oppression and Celebrating Diversity" of an anti-racism seminar which was sponsored by the dean's office.<sup>19</sup> The litany he constantly heard was: all whites are racist, and only they can be racist. Participants were instructed to "unlearn" not through efforts at colorblindness, but through heightened consciousness of race. To admit one's racism is a sign of strength and growth. According to the "onion theory," propagated at the seminar, whites must continue to strip off layers of inherited racism through their whole lives. Throughout the seminar no white participant raised an objection. Weisberg explains that not all Oberlin students are brain-washed, but few want to go on record as opponents of the multicultural agenda.

Instead of the supposed tolerance the ideology of MC and PC seems to create a clear tendency towards fragmentation of the student body. The bases and conceptions of collective identity are becoming increasingly narrow. At Oberlin college, notes Jacob Weisberg, amid charges of

18 Jerry Adler et al. "Taking Offense," *Newsweek* (December 34, 1990), pp. 48-54.

19 Jacob Weisberg, "Thin Skins," *The New Republic* (February 18, 1991), p. 22-24.

racism and sexism, the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Union splintered into four narrow factions: Gay Men of Color, Zani (lesbians of color), Lesbians Be Loud (white lesbians), and the Gay Men's Rap Group (gay white men). A similar thing happened to the Asian-American Alliance. That kind of balkanization has brought down Oberlin's student government and undermined its effort to oppose the Gulf war. Paradoxically, this process of balkanization is also fuelled by affirmative action programs which were designed to facilitate integration at universities and in society at large and atone for the past injustice done to people of color. Affirmative action is a policy instrument of universities that seek to achieve an ethnically diverse student body in order to prepare young people to live in an increasingly multiracial and multicultural society. Diversity is usually pursued through "proportional representation," attempting to shape university classes to approximate the proportion of blacks, Hispanics, whites, Asian Americans, and other groups in the general population. But, as Dinesh D'Souza points out, the lofty goals of proportional representation are frustrated by the fact that different racial groups perform very differently on academic indicators, used at admission, such as grades and standardized test scores.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, the only way for colleges to achieve ethnic proportionalism is to downplay merit criteria, and to accept students from typically under-represented groups, such as blacks, Hispanics and American Indians, over better-qualified students from among whites and Asian Americans. Each year state schools like Berkeley and the University of Virginia turn away hundreds of white and Asian American applicants with straight As, while accepting students from under-represented groups with poor to mediocre academic credentials. But this leads, according to data presented by D'Souza, to extremely high dropout rate of affirmative action students.

Those minority students who manage to stay in colleges experience severe academic difficulties and other classroom pressures. The high expectations of affirmative action students are thwarted and they seek support from others like them, especially older students. Thus begins the process of self-segregation on campus which comes as a surprise to universities whose catalogues celebrate integration and the close interaction of diverse ethnic groups. The other side of the same coin is, as reported

20 Dinesh D Souza, "Sins of Admission," *The New Republic* (February 18, 1991), p. 30-33.

by Tamar Jacoby, that many academically successful black students seem ill at ease with their own achievement—as if they were somehow betraying their race.” Several admitted that they had kept their high school grades secret in order to avoid charges that they were “selling out.” Some students were also scared that mainstream success would somehow kill what was most authentically black within them.

The imperatives of diversity are not confined only to students. Today, preferential recruitment programs for black faculty are practiced at most universities. In 1988 Duke University announced a new affirmative-action policy requiring every department and program to hire at least one additional black professor by 1993 or be threatened by administrative penalties. A number of universities have followed the same path and virtually joined an intense and open competition to lure black, Hispanic, and Native American professors to campus. But some universities have gone further. As Stephen R. Barnett reports, the University of California, Berkeley, not content with numerical diversity, has announced a new goal of “true diversity”<sup>22</sup> This means matching professors’ ethnic or gender identities with the fields in which they work: black teachers in African American history, Chicano faculty in Chicano literature, and, presumably, female professors in women’s subjects. This thinking points toward a segregation of both scholars and academic fields, a tendency already noted by graduate students and faculty at Berkeley and nearby campuses. Nearly all minority doctoral students in Berkeley’s English and history departments are specializing in their “own” ethnic topics. Many white students feel “warned off” ethnic fields by their minority peers.

Multicultural education leaves many important problems unresolved—such as how to avoid reducing nuances of culture to the determinants of race, or how to prevent the teaching of literature from becoming a mere pretext for advancing propaganda of any kind, or how to determine which works should have priority in the limited time available for most college courses and degree programs. But it is also clear that multicultural education is an attempt to deal with the present-day situation of this very large and exceptionally diverse nation with its unique social, political and ethnic history.

21 Tamar Jacoby, “Psyched Out,” *The New Republic* (February 18, 1991), p. 28-30.

22 Stephen R. Barnett, “Get Back,” *The New Republic* (February 18, 1991), p. 24-26

Viewed in a broader social and political context, MC raises two points worth mentioning here. First, it demonstrates that integration in society has its limits. When pushed too hard or failing to achieve its proclaimed objectives, integration falls apart, provokes disintegration. The melting pot is not working interracially. Affirmative action, no matter how mandatory, is failing to provide equal social status or psychological comfort for women, non-whites and other minorities. The outcome is frustration which multiculturalism helps to rationalize and circumvent. Instead of playing the existential game on a common field by white male's rules, minority groups, anticipating their eventual defeat, claim that their own playground must be arranged and different rules established. Here in Europe we may be standing at the threshold of our own multiculturalism as a possible response to the imperatives of European integration. Probably, it will not be so pointedly anti-Western.

Second, Marxism seems to be assuming a new role by joining the miscellaneous groups of anti-establishment forces. In the 19th and early 20th century the emphasis of Marxism was class-based and integrative: Proletarians of the world unite! However, this slogan worked only partially and led to heavy casualties. One of the main reasons for that was the fact that more proletarians were integrated into the capitalist society than were organized to fight against it. Marxism and relevant political organizations were gradually losing their social base—the working class. Probably better suited to work out revolutionary programs and make anti-establishment claims on behalf of the oppressed than to do anything else, Marxism has now found women, non-whites and other minorities to take care of. That is why its emphasis is now predominantly based on gender, race and ethnicity, and aimed to free these target groups from the grip of capitalist integration. Anyway, today Marxists seem to be more successful at American universities than they have ever been among its working class.

Consequently, some foundations and associations, let alone families, who nowadays send young people from the Baltics over to American universities to obtain up-to-date Western education there, may be surprised to get back (if any) some really well educated 21st century Marxists. By that time they may be needed, who knows?

## Review Essay: The End of the Culture Wars?

James Atlas. *Battle of the Books: The Cultural Debate in America*. New York: Norton, 1992. 157 pp. 17.95 US\$.

David Bromwich. *Politics By Other Means: Higher Education and Group Thinking*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992. 257 pp. 30.00 US\$

Frederick Crews. *The Critics Bear It Away: American Fiction and the Academy*. New York: Random House, 1992. 213 pp. 20.00 US\$.

Morris Dickstein. *Double Agent: The Critic and Society*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 220 pp. 23.00 US\$.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. *Loot: Canons, Notes on the Culture Wars*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992. 199 pp. 19.95 US\$.

Gerald Graff. *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*. New York: Norton, 1992. 214 pp. 19.95 US\$.

Camille Paglia. *Sex, Art, and American Culture*. New York: Vintage, 1992. 337 pp. 13.00 US\$.

In the past decade we have witnessed a curious battle over cultural reform being waged in the United States. This Culture War has involved questions of racial equality, educational policy and cultural definition. In the late 1960s, academic radicals began questioning the traditional interpretation of the United States as an open society in which there existed a consensus about the meaning of democracy. A new generation of historians and literary critics pointed to "silent" groups—minorities, women, the working class—which had been excluded from the social consensus and the cultural mainstream. These radical academics saw a connection between scholarly revisionism and political reform. As Jane Tompkins put it in her revisionist study of the canon, *Sensational Designs*: "The literary canon, as codified by a cultural elite, has power to influence the way the country thinks across a broad range of issues. The struggle now being waged in the professoriate over which writers deserve canonical status is not just a struggle over the relative merits of literary geniuses: it is a struggle among contending factions for the right to be represented in the picture America draws of itself."

In *Battle of the Books*, James Atlas provides a lucid account of the evolution of the campaign to transform the educational system to more closely reflect what the radicals thought was the true multicultural nature of American society. As this campaign took on the character of a crusade, its more militant members pushed for an



enforced code of appropriate behavior to regulate manners with respect to race, sex, and ethnicity. This zeal for legislated intellectual and social behavior to promote the rights of self-proclaimed minorities came to be known as "political correctness." Despite the "ethnic" emphasis of the American movement, those who followed the upheavals in European universities after 1968 will not have to be reminded of the puritanical character of academic political orthodoxy.

In the late 1980s, as the European version of political correctness waned with the collapse of international socialism, American culture witnessed a counter-attack led by a mixed bag of traditionalist intellectuals and political neo-conservatives. Best-selling books like Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind*, Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education*, and Arthur Schlesinger's *The Disuniting of America* called attention to radical excesses on college campuses and questioned the efficacy of the total renunciation of the Western tradition implied in the radical's attack on bourgeois culture. These books were picked up by George Will, William Bennett, and other members of the neo-conservative political establishment as evidence that even with the collapse of the Cold War eternal vigilance was necessary to protect traditional American values. By the end of 1990, the battle had reached the point of a Mexican stand-off between two forms of political correctness, one on the left and the other on the right. As Frederick Crews describes it, "Both parties prefer to keep politically noxious books out of students' hands so as to allow the beneficial works to inculcate correct ideas without distraction. Both are overwhelmingly preoccupied with social order—on one side with maintaining it, on the other with inverting it. And both are convinced that the ideals and textual operations of literature professors greatly matter to the structure and future direction of society at large."

Perhaps 1992 will go down as the year in which the Culture War in America ended. Like one of those interminable civil wars in the Third World which reward combatants, terrorize civilian populations and impoverish countries, the conflict over curriculum reform, speech codes, and critical theories has reached the point where it no longer instructs or entertains. Consequently, phrases like political correctness, decanonization and multiculturalism threaten, as Ihab Hassan once said of post-modernism, to move from neologism to derelict cliché without ever attaining the dignity of a concept. Recently, a flurry of books has been calling for a ceasefire, negotiating a settlement, or simply declaring the war was over. What was noteworthy was that the most interesting of them rejected the intransigent positions of *both* left and right. In the year that Bill Clinton seized the centrist position in our political culture, these academics were claiming the middle ground in our cultural politics.

The most contentious issue in the Cultural War concerns educational reform and the curriculum debate. In *Beyond the Culture Wars* literary critic Gerald Graff offers some practical proposals to resolve the dilemma. Graff views the battlefield from a special vantage point since he attacked leftist critical theory in the 1970s only to discover in the 1980s that he had more in common with his adversaries than with his allies. Graff acknowledges that there is an educational crisis involving what students do and ought to know. But part of the problem, he argues, is the result of the infor-

mation explosion of recent years, with its attendant growth in academic specialization and professionalization. "The more there is to know, the harder it is to be sure which part of it all you are supposed to remember." Until now, administrators have sought to maintain an academic consensus by a process of accretion: as new fields and methodologies developed, more courses and instructors were added to accommodate them. However, administered accretion is not academic consensus and such consensus is not intellectual synthesis. "It is time to recognize that arriving at consensus is not the only way to pull a curriculum together, that difference can be a basis for coherence if it is openly engaged rather than kept out of sight." Or as Graff put it succinctly in an earlier formulation: "Here would be a practical solution to the 'great books debate' now raging across the land: teach the debate. The solution to the problem is to teach the problem." What Graff proposes is the reorganization of education into interdisciplinary "learning communities" where scholars and students debate the contemporary issues in the classroom.

On the face of it, Graff's solution is a genial one, allowing students to explore new fields while specialists get on with their careers. But there are several reservations to be made about Graff's proposal. The first is practical. The evidence suggests that something more fundamental than simple curriculum reform is needed to deal with such critical symptoms as ethnic polarization, racial and sexual harassment, abridgement of freedom of speech, exploding budget deficits, and declining academic performance. The problems are not simply academic and theoretical but social and political as well. As education costs rise and university budgets fall, competing groups of students and faculty exert more pressure in an atmosphere of Darwinian competition. The sad result is the increasing segregation of students into self-selected interest groups and the increasing atomization of teachers into professional lobbies squabbling over scarce resources. This situation is hardly conducive to civility, much less the establishment of "learning communities," however desirable they may be.

We can get a whiff of the present acrimonious atmosphere, where arguments have hardened into new orthodoxies, in Camille Paglia's new collection of essays, *Sex Art, and American Culture*. Paglia is a gadfly who combines the provocativeness of Madonna and the militancy of Joan of Arc, but by no stretch of the imagination could she be identified with the Allan Bloom/William Bennett school of stuffy conservatism. Yet compare Graff's version of the academic crisis with that proffered by Paglia in her long, rambling and very funny essay, "Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders." Graff thinks that specialization enhances undergraduate teaching. Camille Paglia disagrees: "Specialists are the last thing undergraduates need." Graff approves of academic conferences and recommends their expanded use in teaching. Paglia demurs. "Attendance at conferences must cease to be defined as professional activity," she argues. "It should be seen for what it is: prestige-hunting and long-range job-seeking junkets, meat-rack mini-vacations." Graff feels that new critical theory has revitalized the study of literature. "Enough already of Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault poured like ketchup over everything," counters Paglia. "Lacan: the French fog machine ... Derrida's method: masturbation without pleasure." In this polemical

climate, "teaching the problem" would probably require more civility than many academics possess.

One part of the current debate concerns what should be taught in the classroom. Another part deals with how canonical works of literature should be treated critically. In his new book, *The Critics Bear It Away*, Frederick Crews expertly surveys the current state of American literary scholarship and the contentious debate over the literary canon. Like Graff, Crews takes great pains to separate himself from the ideologies of left and right. "By situating my book as far as possible from great-thoughts conservatism on one side and death-of-the-author theory on the other, I am expressing my unshaken allegiance to liberalism in the broadest meaning of the term," he writes. "It ought to be possible for critics who are politically unembarrassed by ambiguity and irony to leave 'cold war' rationalization behind, branch out from the canon, yet continue to affirm what radicals sometimes forget, that there is no simple correlation between political correctness and artistic power."

Like Graff, Crews welcomes new directions in literary analysis but he is likely to be more critical of the excesses of what he calls Left Eclecticism. In the past two decades younger American literature scholars have attacked their elders for their alleged conservative description of America as a consensus culture. Instead, the radicals tend to view classic American literature as an instrument of social control. Crews acknowledges the need for accommodating a broader view of American culture but scores this New Americanist criticism for "its self-righteousness, its tendency to conceive of American history only as a highlight film of outrages, its impatience with artistic purposes other than 'redefining the social order,' and its choice of critical principles according to the partisan cause at hand". He is particularly shrewd at exposing the double think of radical critics who "interrogate" canonical and non-canonical writers by different standards. "What New Americanists discover in a standard work is usually a defect of consciousness that they had posited from the outset<sup>3</sup> — some failure of political correctness. "The conclusion can prove disappointingly commonplace after the dazzling theoretical moves that have led up to it."

Despite the methodological limitations of their criticism, the New Americanists do understand how the mechanics of cultural hegemony affect the making of a literary canon. As Crews observes, "While we have been debating which nineteenth-century works 'have lasting appeal,' most of us have forgotten to ask: appeal to whom? As the academy has come to dominate what is published and taught about premodern literature, the whole notion of making a diffuse 'educated public' into an arbiter has become ever more implausible. The truth is that for any works written before the last seventy years or so, the most influential academics get to decide who's in and who's out." Thus Crews also knows that the insurgent New Americanists will redefine the future canon of American literature as they come to form the new academic establishment. "They will be right about the most important books and the most fruitful ways of studying them because, as they always knew in their leaner days, those who hold power are right by definition."

Among the academics who have shaped the canon debate in the field of African-

## REVIEW ESSAY: THE END OF THE CULTURE WAR?

American studies, none has been more influential than Henry Louis Gates, Jr. His new collection of essays, *Loose Canons*, chronicles his progress through the Culture War since the mid-80's. Gates is a self-professed Cultural Pluralist who has tried to steer a middle course between the nationalist extremes of left and right. As he puts it in the Introduction, "Stated simply; the thrust of the pieces gathered here is this: Ours is a late-twentieth-century world profoundly fissured by nationalist, ethnicity, race, class and gender. And the only way to transcend these divisions—to forge, for once, a civic culture that respects both differences and commonalities—is through education that seeks to comprehend the diversity of human culture."

There is nothing controversial here "But as the eighties came to a close," Gates confesses, "a nagging doubt began to surface: Was academic politics finally a high-brow version of what *Women's Wear Daily* would call the 'style wars'?" More significantly, was the current emphasis on critical theory an impediment to the propagation of multicultural education? Had the resistance to theory on the part of the traditionalists given way to a hardened resistance to anything that wasn't packaged as theory on the part of the cultural radicals? Despite his continued allegiance to producing a theoretical basis for African-American studies, Gates has reluctantly concluded: "The oppositional style of criticism has failed us, failed us in our attempt to come to grips with an America that can no longer be construed as an integral whole. What Richard Hofstadter famously called the 'paranoid style' of American politics has become the paranoid style of American studies."

A third aspect of the Culture War is the decline of a public space for serious cultural debate in America. In *Double Agent*, Morris Dickstein wistfully recalls an older tradition of journalistic criticism which was superseded when books were supplanted by television and the man of letters was replaced by the professional academic. Dickstein's title refers to the "engaged critic" who is a "double agent trying to balance art and social concern." Beginning with the Victorians, Dickstein traces the evolution of an Anglo-American tradition of cultural criticism from Matthew Arnold through Lionel Trilling and the postwar New York intellectuals to its present state of decline in "the professionalization of criticism" and "its renunciation of a public language and a wider audience." For Dickstein, true intellectuals are still generalists, not academic specialists, and true critics deal with writing, not criticism.

Dickstein is especially good at reassessing Arnold as "the first spokesman for the modern demand for 'relevance' in literary studies" and drawing parallels between Arnold's generation which lived in the shadow of a waning Romanticism and contemporary critics who survive in the wake of an exhausted Modernism. But the comparison is not at all flattering for the postmodernists. "Wrapped up in language, seeing even public events as linguistic incidents, criticism lost its old connection with conduct and bottled itself up with a literature it no longer believed in." Instead, Dickstein prefers the older New York intellectuals who, he says, "were probably the closest thing America had to a Russian or French intelligentsia, a group of deracinated writers in rebellion against their social origins, passionate about ideas, marginal to political and economic power yet subtly influencing the mind and character of

future generations." Dickstein's nostalgia for a vanished era of committed public criticism is reminiscent of Alfred Kazin's remark that "Our literary period may yet be remembered as one in which the book business replaced the literary world, in which literary theory replaced literature, and in which, as Irving Howe has said, Marxism came to its end—in the English Department."

Irving Howe's observation requires some comment. One of the tenets of radical theory is its insistence that the aesthetic is political and one of the dogmas of political correctness is that the university is a microcosm of the entire society. Yet the Left has posed its critique in a deliberately obscurantist language that has excluded a broader public, which has led even some leftist critics to wonder "whether this kind of criticism is part of a viable attack on inequality and injustice, or whether it is only an escape valve that allows intellectuals and college students to mouth off and then go about their business."

This curious phenomenon leads to a more perplexing question posed by James Atlas in *Battle of the Books*. "Why should a revolutionary curricular struggle be happening at a time when radical politics in America is virtually extinct?" His answer is that the dramatic change in the ethnic composition of both students and faculty has simply created the demand for radical educational change to reflect the new reality. True. But there is another explanation. In *The Rise and Fall of the American Left*, John Patrick Diggins notes that the rise of poststructuralism coincided with the fall of the 1968 student revolution. As the neo-radical movement collapsed inward on the academy, the neo-conservative intellectuals fled the turbulent universities to right-wing think tanks and public journalism. When the smoke cleared, in the Eighties, the left held the universities while the right controlled everything else. Thus critical theory became a substitute for political activism. "Poststructuralist fatalism toward established power served a consoling function, assuring the disillusioned survivors of the New Left that the collapse of their emancipatory dreams was built into the nature of things," notes Frederick Crews. "At the same time, its private jargon, its token allegiance to all things 'marginalized' by the capitalistic West, and its vision of interpretation without ground or end fostered a clannish leftism-of-the-library that promised immunity from further rude surprises."

It is this situation that David Bromwich analyzes in *Politics By Other Means*, a magnificent polemic against the present mindless separation of power and intellect in government and the equally senseless confusion of politics and education in the academy. Bromwich lashes out impartially at a conservative "culture of assent" which treats tradition as holy scripture and a radical "culture of suspicion" which treats it as rabid ideology. For both, "politics and education turn out to be identical if one accepts the ethic of group thinking, which looks on all learning as a form of social adjustment." Against them, Bromwich posits a liberal idea of cosmopolitan culture in which education is eclectic and personal while tradition is continuous and malleable.

As an academic, Bromwich is particularly hard on his radical colleagues who have embraced the university-as-microcosm idea and taken it to absurd lengths. He notes

that "for the past decade or so, the activist tone in scholarship has been found compatible with a restriction of politics to the universities themselves. Indeed, the standard defense of institutional radicalism in the humanities, and increasingly in the study of the law as well, is that scholars can have their deepest influence on public discourse simply by doing what they do anyway." This kind of revolutionary romanticism allows theorists to have their radical cake and eat it but it can pose a threat to the ideals of free inquiry and independent thought that characterize liberal culture. Thus when Harvard Professor Barbara Johnson argues that "professors should have less freedom of expression than writers and artists, because professors are supposed to be creating a better community," she not only rejects the liberal idea that knowledge is a cosmopolitan good but affirms the fundamentalist notion that knowledge is only a collective good. Finally, in setting out to reform the university as a substitute for reforming the larger society, radicals concede the impossibility of serious political reform after twelve years of Republican rule. "Plainly, anyway, we are all in the same boat," concludes Bromwich sadly. "We have no politics in America."

It is impossible here to do justice to Bromwich's rich argument but let me suggest, in closing, some things we may learn from it and the other books I have mentioned. First, the strident Culture War has reached a dead end. All the critics I have discussed refuse what Bromwich calls "the crude satire of the right and the protective clichés of the left." Moreover, some of the most controversial spokesmen have left the scene. Allan Bloom is dead. William Bennett is out. Even Stanley Fish and Dinesh D'Souza have closed down their traveling show on "illiberal education pro and con" because of declining interest.

Second, the academic debate over the canon has reached the point of diminishing returns. As even Matthew Arnold and T. S. Eliot knew, tradition is always being renewed. Especially in American literature, there has been a constant reassessment of a literary canon in the twentieth century with respect to such major writers as Melville, Thoreau, Twain, Fitzgerald and Faulkner. Today, most sane academics believe with Tzvetan Todorov that "The canon is neither immutable nor totally malleable." Beyond that, the significance of the academic debate has been exaggerated. Jane Tompkins and Gerald Graff may believe that reforming the canon will reform American culture but the pedagogical problems are more fundamental and intractable. As James Atlas's observes, "In a way it seems futile to discuss the curriculum, to debate which books students ought to read, when—especially in inner-city schools—many of them can't read at all."

Third, there is serious questioning of the efficacy of our decade-long pursuit of theory. As David Lodge has argued, "English and literary studies have reached a point in their theoretical development when they've become almost incapable of communication to the layman at the very historical moment when they've most needed to justify their existence. The brightest and most innovative people in literary criticism are as impenetrable as nuclear physicists. The left-wing intelligentsia is trapped in a kind of ghetto that only they understand, and so can't bring any leverage to bear on the body politic." In the process, the fashion of French-based critical

theory may have become *passé*. It is not surprising that Camille Paglia has suggested, "Let's dump the French in Boston Harbor and let them swim home." But even a former enthusiast like Henry Louis Gates has recently mourned the way "we've been betrayed by our two-decades-long love affair with theory." In *Loose Canons* he observes: "Oscar Wilde once quipped that when good Americans die, they go to Paris. I think in Paris, when good theories die, they go to America."

And here the particular parochialism of the American Culture Wars is revealed. The cultural dispute of the past decade has preempted serious political debate, reducing real social problems to symbolic questions of canon formation and group identity. Interestingly enough, the books under review, all published in 1992, barely mention the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Communism. How these epochal events will alter our political perceptions is yet to be determined but our academic intellectuals might learn something from watching the process of democratic renewal and the revival of liberal thinking taking place in that other part of the world. But with a changing world order and the election of a new President, Americans will have to review and revise both the older platitudes of liberalism and the newer clichés of radicalism.

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