REVIEW ESSAYS

The PC Harangue†

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The furor over “political correctness” has been an acutely frustrating cultural phenomenon; pregnant with great possibility, touching on vital and fascinating issues, yet initially formulated in a one-sided and myopic manner that guarantees sterility or active harm. Unfortunately, Paul Berman’s collection of articles on the subject shares many of the same characteristics.

Mr. Berman has gathered together a set of excellent essays and interviews from writers ranging from Dinesh D’Souza and Roger Kimball to Patricia Williams and Stanley Fish. The essays cover some of the main issues normally debated under the heading of PC: Free speech on campus and the construction of the canon are the central themes, although the introduction emphasizes the sinister minor chords of French anti-humanist philosophy. Mr. Berman’s own writing is characteristically lively and lucid, and he brings to the issue a sensitivity not often found in the pages of the mainstream press. From the evidence of his earlier articles, one would say that this is a person who believes that ideas matter, that the possible range of desirable political positions does not stop at the eastern tip of the Demo-

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1. The collection is comprised of the following essays: Molefi Kete Asante, Multiculturalism: An Exchange; Michael Berubé, Public Image Limited: Political Correctness and the Media’s Big Lie; Dinesh D’Souza & Robert MacNeil, The Big Chill? Interview with Dinesh D’Souza; Barbara Ehrenreich, The Challenge for the Left; Enrique Fernández, P.C. Rider; Stanley Fish, There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech and It’s a Good Thing. Too; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., Whose Canon Is It, Anyway?; Ted Gordon & Waheema Lubiano, The Statement of the Black Faculty Caucus: Nat Hentoff, “Speech Codes” on the Campus and Problems of Free Speech; Irving Howe, The Value of the Canon; Roger Kimball, The Periphery v. the Center: The MLA in Chicago; Hilton Kramer, The Prospect Before Us; Richard Perry & Patricia Williams, Freedom of Hate Speech; Katha Pollitt, Why Do We Read?; Paula Rothenberg, Critics of Attempts to Democratize the Curriculum Are Waging a Campaign to Misrepresent the Work of Responsible Professors; Edward W. Said, The Politics of Knowledge; John Searle, The Storm over the University; Catherine R. Stimpson, On Differences: Modern Language Association Presidential Address 1990; Cornel West, Diverse New World; George F. Will, Radical English.

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ocratic Party, and that the function of political journalism is to combine both ideas and opinions in a style less pedestrian than that of most major American newspapers. Finally, Mr. Berman has obviously thought about the whole PC question, instead of purchasing his opinions in job lots from Newsweek or the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) as many other commentators on the issue seem to have done.

These are all virtues, considerable virtues. Yet in my admittedly biased opinion Berman’s whole approach is wrong, and this collection reflects his mistake. We part company when Berman chooses his title. The PC “debate” is not a debate, it is a harangue—a politically motivated, brilliantly publicized conservative attack on progressive ideas in academia. “Political correctness” is the newest addition to the rich American lexicon of political abuse. It carries multiple connotations—ranging from the silly (calling short people “vertically challenged”) to the Stalinist. Not since the McCarthy period and its “dangerous foreign ideologies” have conservatives had such an effective club with which to beat the left. Anyone who thinks that racial and gender injustice are still live issues can be branded as both silly and dangerous. Who wants to be labelled as “PC”? Ironically, the label that is supposed to describe censorious leftists has probably done more to silence progressives than anything since the accusation that the left lost us China. And just as McCarthy era liberals rushed to kick the communists out of the ACLU, or to vie with each other in their condemnation of socialism, so too liberal supporters have joined the attack on PC. If this support were based on careful analysis of the serious claims about repression of free speech and turf-grabbing by subordinated groups, or even ludicrous verbal niceties, then it would be cause for soul searching. But a distressing amount of the liberal writing against PC violates the basic tenets of journalism and scholarship—simple credos like “check your sources” or “argue the other side of the question” have gone out the window. Sadly, from the evidence of the introduction to this book, Mr. Berman is a case in point.

As the last sentence suggests, it is in the editor’s introduction that this book really goes wrong. Though the themes of the book are limited, Mr. Berman has picked a wide, almost dizzying range of essays on those themes. Precisely because of the richness of the contributions, the reader’s eye is thrown back to the introduction for guidance, seeking some structure in which all of this cacophony and passion might be systematized, reconciled, made rational. The editor’s introduction is thus even more important than is ordinarily the case. What does he say? If you read Paul Berman’s introduction to this book, you might come away believing that the “debate over political correctness” is in reality a crusade. Humanists, civil libertarians and a few decent but occasionally overzealous conservatives are engaged in a des-

perate struggle for the soul of the academy. Their opponents in this struggle are a mysterious freemasonry of esoteric French philosophers. Of course, there is another side to the issue. A number of the contributions in Berman’s collection—most notably the essay, Freedom of Hate Speech, written by Patricia Williams and Richard Perry—make the point that the attack on political correctness is factually unsupported and politically motivated. Berman acknowledges that a few liberals have been bleating that the “debate” tends to inhibit them, to undermine their attempts to bring previously excluded groups into faculties, student bodies and reading lists. Although he professes some sympathy for these liberals, Berman thinks that they are victims of provincial Yankee ignorance. He takes seriously the conservatives’ claim that contemporary academics are neglecting the humanities. Consequently, his response to the anguished cry of these well-meaning liberals is to lecture them on the dangers of what he calls “768 Philosophy”—a muddy blend of Foucault, Lévi-Strauss and Derrida. The tone is eerily reminiscent to that of centrists in the late 1940s, explaining the dangerous (but understandable) attraction of communism to well-meaning liberals who cared about social justice. Berman’s apparent message is that, in their New World naivete, academics think they can merely sample these sophisticated foreign ideas, but they are actually buying into a giant system of thought that is subversive and antihumanist. “Inhale one puff and you’re hooked for life”—or something like that. I’m all for this kind of skepticism toward the current fads in academia. Unfortunately, Berman never extends the same skepticism toward the conservatives who chose to attack PC in the first place.

This double standard mars discussion of PC in general and Paul Berman’s introduction in particular. Despite the lucidity of his style, Berman misses the three most important facets of the PC Indictment—its conservative origins, its internal contradictions, and its small grains of truth. He is so busy talking about the “fair minded academic crusaders” who criticize PC excesses that he fails to see that the PC Indictment is a tendentious and internally contradictory conservative attack on liberals in academia. Too busy worrying about the corrosive effects of dangerous French philosophy, he misses the fact that the main objects of conservative ire are actually relativism and egalitarianism, the staple fodder of American political discourse. Finally, the chimerical nature of Berman’s picture of PC distracts us

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4. See pp. 6-11.
6. P. 226 (“Most accounts of this campus dispute have been characterized by repeated distortions of fact and a profound bad faith with history.”); see generally pp. 226-30.
7. Pp. 20-21 (discussing increased numbers of minority students and occurrences of racist incidents on college campuses).
8. P. 2 (“The postmodern professors have set out to undermine the traditional study of literature and the humanities. In the eyes of their accusers, they have reduced literary criticism to a silly obsession with political questions that don’t belong in literature, and to a weird concern with sexual questions.”).
from the real lessons we could learn from a rigorous critique of political correctness.

**Conservative Origins**

I mentioned earlier that the PC debate seems more like a harangue. It was conceived as a harangue and it was as a harangue that it was first delivered. (Berman must know this because its “deliverers” were the same conservative writers he includes in his collection.) The structure, anecdotes and rhetoric of the harangue are drawn from books such as *The Closing of the American Mind* 10 and *Illiberal Education*. 11 These books were funded by conservative think-tanks and educational foundations which have as their avowed goal the transformation of the academy, precisely because the academy is one of the last places in this society where progressive ideas have some currency. I am not indulging in that bane of American political dialogue, the conspiracy theory. There is nothing wrong with the John Olin Foundation, or the AEI, openly funding Dinesh D’Souza’s attacks on affirmative action, feminism, and curricular change. 12 But surely it behooves us to think twice about the origins of the critique. If People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals had funded a purportedly “disinterested” study on the meat-packing industry, Berman might have paused before buying into the structure of debate thus created, or citing without comment a string of news articles that merely recite the inaccurate anecdotes drawn from the original polemic. Instead, he shows a curious unwillingness to look at the origins of the attack on PC. What would he have found if he had?

He would have found, I think, that the attack on “political correctness” was quite clearly a politically motivated attack on liberal ideas in academic life. The attack was originally mounted by conservative writers such as Bloom, Bork, Kimball, and D’Souza. According to these writers, a small coterie of radicals has retreated from the losses of socialism worldwide, retiring to American universities, where they have proceeded to enforce a rigid, multicultural orthodoxy on academic life. 13 Before D’Souza et al. appropriated the term “PC,” one would only have encountered it as a leftist in-joke, and always in the context of self-mockery. Then the deluge began. First, a trickle of references to the scourge of “politically correct” attacks on Western culture, academic standards, and even free speech appeared, generally in conservative articles about higher education. Gradually, the trickle swelled into a flood of books, articles, and op-ed pieces. One writer pointed out that


12. Id. at ix (thanking the American Enterprise Institute for giving time and research facilities and the John Olin Foundation for research support).

the stories about political correctness ran second only to stories about the Gulf War." In the process, the term changed its meaning. Having started out as a criticism of campus politics, it broadened to engulf the wider stage of national affairs. Front page spreads on *Time* and *Newsweek*, prime time talk shows, humorous magazine pieces—the flood was so sudden and so intense that it calls out for explanation. It is all the more remarkable because it has not yet gone the way of most “trend” issues in the popular media. As a story, political correctness has outlasted the Gulf War. As a term of abuse, it seems to be a permanent addition in the lexicon of political stereotypes. And it all began with a set of criticisms of American universities. I will refer to these criticisms as the “PC Indictment.”

The PC Indictment begins with three relatively simple claims about the ideology, goals, and character of academics. First, progressives, liberals, and leftists are “over-represented” in higher education. Roger Kimball, author of *Tenured Radicals*, writes, “It has often been observed that yesterday’s student radical is today’s tenured professor or academic dean.” This is A Bad Thing. Second, for the reasons I mentioned earlier, these academics and intellectuals have “values antagonistic to a traditional, bourgeois society.” This, too, is A Bad Thing. Third, unable to win support for their ideas in the realm of politics, these leftists instead have decided to politicize the universities.

The first sign of the politicization of universities is an attack by leftists on the very notion of Western Culture. As Roger Kimball describes it, “Their object is nothing less than the destruction of the values, methods, and goals of traditional humanistic study.” The most frequently cited example is Stanford’s reform of the “Western Civ.” component of its undergraduate core curriculum to include some writings from women and people of color and to include the cultural traditions of Americans whose ancestors did not come from Western Europe. (Actually, the major change was only to one course out of a list of eight possible options. Somehow this fact seldom makes it onto the page.) There are other examples, almost all of which conservatives view with both incredulity and horror. Kimball’s list of anathema topics is characteristic of these attacks:

[T]he transformation of the substance and even the goals of the typical liberal arts program has been staggering. Who could have guessed that the women’s movement would have succeeded in getting gender accepted as a “fundamental category of literary analysis” by departments of literature in nearly every major university? Who could have guessed that administrators would one day be falling over themselves in their rush to replace the “white Western” curriculum of traditional humanistic studies with a smorgasbord of courses designed to appeal to various ethnic and racial sensitivities?

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15. Kimball, supra note 13, at xiv.
16. Bork, supra note 13, at 8.
17. Kimball, supra note 13, at xi.
18. Id. at xiv-xv.
Conservatives are upset by these developments for the same reasons that they are upset by taking prayer out of the schools or allowing bilingual education. In their view, these actions represent an inappropriate, self-flagellating desire to undercut the “majority” cultural heritage—either out of straightforward guilt for past injustice, out of an overly legalistic insistence that the American state should stand for no particular religion or pattern of culture, or because of a commitment to abstract political ideals like ‘diversity,’ and ‘pluralism.’

The second strand of the critique alleges that universities are attacking other features of Western culture by pursuing a twofold credo of relativism and egalitarianism. According to Allan Bloom, universities teach the following:

We should not think our way is better than others. The intention is not so much to teach the students about other times and places as to make them aware of the fact that their preferences are only that—accidents of their time and place. Their beliefs do not entitle them as individuals, or collectively as a nation, to think they are superior to anyone else. . . . This folly means that men are not permitted to seek for [sic] the natural human good and admire it when found . . . . Instinct and intellect must be suppressed by education. The natural soul is to be replaced with an artificial one.19

In the PC Indictment, relativism is not merely an attack on moral fiber: It is also a politically motivated attack on knowledge. The argument gets a little complicated here. Some conservatives, such as Robert Bork and Allan Bloom, seem offended by relativism in part because they believe it stands in the way of social conservatism. Social conservatives often advocate measures that liberals criticize for being “legislated morality.”20 Students who have been “indoctrinated” into the belief that values are relative and that morality is a matter of private concern will obviously be skeptical of this type of politics. Conservatives claim that the radicals are deflecting attention from Absolute Truth and argue that morals are “merely a matter of opinion” precisely so as to prevent the majority from imposing morality through law. In Allan Bloom’s words, “It was possible to expand the space exempt from legitimate social and political regulation only by contracting the claims to moral and political knowledge.”21

To put it baldly, some conservatives seem to think that both the PC promotion of moral relativism and the PC “attack on Western culture” are motivated by an opposition to social conservatism. Students must be kept away from the classics and from Absolute Truth. Otherwise, having gained a glimpse of Truth, the student might realize that morals are not relative and

20. I would tend to agree with the social conservatives that much of law is “legislated morality.” Sodomy laws and so forth merely seem more like the legislation of moral values because liberals think they violate the harm principle—legislating a restriction of freedom when the behavior concerned harms no one. Conservatives, of course, disagree. Thus, the fight over moral legislation is something of a red herring.
therefore that it is both possible and desirable for the state to regulate the areas where moral relativism formerly held sway. If enough members of the community felt they were harmed by the particular form of sex you and your lover practiced in the bedroom, they should be able to regulate it. Citizens brainwashed by their universities into believing that values are relative might oppose such a criminal statute. Citizens convinced of the availability of Absolute Truth, we are supposed to assume, would not.

Commitment to relativism is only part of the story. According to the PC Indictment, universities teach a second pernicious doctrine: They teach students to believe in egalitarianism. Some of the conservative critics are willing to admit that the damage has already been done by an unreflective egalitarian tradition in American society. (Interestingly, although a long-standing tradition, this is also A Bad Thing.) But whatever students learned at home, universities make it worse. I say "worse" because egalitarian ideas lead to results conservatives think are horrific and unfair, ranging from affirmative action to progressive taxation.

As far as conservatives are concerned, the worst aspect of egalitarianism on campuses is an undue attention to the interests of (supposedly) oppressed groups or minorities. Conservatives believe there is a strong PC line in favor of minorities and they do not like it. Indeed, some of them consider it positively un-American. Alan Bloom opines, "This reversal of the founding intention with respect to minorities is most striking. For the Founders, minorities are in general bad things, mostly identical to factions, selfish groups who have no concern as such for the common good."22 Many conservatives cast themselves as defender of the interests of the majority from these "selfish" minorities. "The very idea of majority—now understood to be selfish interest—is done away with in order to protect the minorities."23 The demands of a Martin Luther King or a Gloria Steinem are, like the demands of oil producers or bottle manufacturers, a matter of special pleading from "interest groups." Again, there is an ironic twist here. The claim that all "selfish interests" are morally equivalent—except those of the majority, of course—seems rather similar to the very moral relativism conservatives attack.

Conservatives believe that egalitarianism is also hostile to merit and standards. Because of their obsession with "oppression," the tenured radicals insist that members of historically disfavored groups be hired as teachers and admitted as students, rather than proceeding on the basis of color- and gender-blind merit, as was previously the practice. This is a double Bad Thing. First, it means that our universities will not have the most highly qualified students and teachers. Second, it is a part of a larger attack on the very notion of meritocracy and quality, which in turn reinforces the attacks made on the traditional curriculum. Dinesh D'Souza, for example, claims that university

22. Id. at 31.
23. Id.
administrators might want to fight curricular changes, but cannot because of
their earlier support for affirmative action. He writes:

[Having championed] the principle of "representation" in admissions, they
have acknowledged the indeterminacy of merit standards, the unreliability
of standardized tests, the need to reform tests so that different groups fare
equally, the inevitability of political considerations entering into the assign-
ment of merit, and so on. It seems a bit late in the day for college presi-
dents, deans, and professors to assert that the curriculum should be exempt
from this egalitarian critique.24

In this argument, as in almost every argument that conservatives bring,
the main critique is not on the merits of the progressive idea, but on the
hypothetical consequences. Rather than showing, for example, that current
standardized tests really are objective, they merely harangue liberals for
doubting their objectivity. Instead of defending the current criteria for
"merit," they point out the terrible consequences for society if the mer-
itocracy did not function well. Rather than arguing that specific books in-
cluded in the new curriculum are not as good as those they replace, and
explaining the criteria on which to make that judgement, conservatives pre-
fer to make ominous noises about the terrible consequences of doubting the
traditional criteria of merit. Berman takes the same tack, saying that French
philosophy would mean the death of humanism,25 as though this claim (even
if true) somehow disproved the philosophical ideas themselves. The bizarre
aspect of this form of argument is that it is the last form one would expect
from believers in Truth. In the vision of epistemology that Bloom and his
allies claim to champion, consequentialist arguments give us no reason what-
soever to believe in the truth or falsity of a statement. Consider the follow-
ning arguments: "Doubting the accuracy of standardized tests would throw
the whole of the meritocracy into question," or, "My Christmas would be
ruined if there weren't a Santa Claus." Even if we believed the factual
assertion, so what? Does that mean that standardized tests really do test merit
accurately and objectively or that Santa Claus does exist? Conservatives are
cought here, and not once but twice. First, they are using the very intellec-
tual tools they criticize: consequentialist arguments rather than arguments
about truth or falsity. Second, those arguments don't even prove their point.

Finally, we come to the aspect of the PC Indictment which, together
with affirmative action and the reform of the core curriculum, has received
the most attention, and which dominates both the selections in,26 and the
introduction to, Paul Berman's book.27 Being obsessed with prior oppres-
sion and the concerns of minority groups, the "tenured radicals" are ludi-
crously oversensitive about speech that might somehow upset touchy
members of minority groups.28 (Or white women, for that matter.)29 This

24. D'SOUZA, supra note 11, at 246-47.
25. P. 6 (noting that "[the '68 Philosophy] was a revolt against liberal humanism").
27. See, e.g., pp. 2-3, 5, 24.
28. P. 2 ("In the name of 'sensitivity' towards others and under pain of being denounced a
sensitivity offends conservatives in and of itself, because they say it smacks of "self-laceration." Tom Wolfe's *Radical Chic* is a favorite reference point here. But according to the PC Indictment, the problem does not stop at self-laceration. If we believe the stories put forward by writers such as Dinesh D'Souza, universities all over the country are moving to regulate speech through disciplinary codes, while students cow their colleagues and teachers into censoring themselves, lest they be accused of being racist or sexist. I should note that I believe the concerns over free speech to be genuinely troubling. This part of the accusation comes not just from conservatives but from a number of civil libertarians (real and *soi-disant*). Here, my complaint is not that Mr. Berman has ignored the political motivations behind the critique, but that he fails to give us the context in which that critique could be discussed and understood. To be fair, this flaw is common to almost all the writing on the subject, and Mr. Berman does include an interesting essay by Stanley Fish, *There's No Such Thing as Free Speech and It's a Good Thing, Too,* that is definitely outside of the mainstream picture.

There are four fairly obvious problems with the free speech component of the PC Indictment, each of which needs to be addressed by any book that attempts to describe or capture the debate. First, while most of the stories about political correctness are relatively unburdened by tiresome factual evidence, the stories about the repression of free speech are particularly riven with errors and distortions, even leaving aside the idea's initial implausibility.

Second, in some of the cases described by the critics of political correctness, there seems to be a complete failure to recognize that free speech cuts both ways. If I tell a black student that even when she honestly believes her classmate's position to be racist she is not allowed to say so, I am hardly supporting the cause of free speech. The same goes for the students who find it objectionable when a professor always casts women in the role of secretaries, men in the role of lawyers. What are we supposed to do in the name of the First Amendment, tell the students to shut up?

Third, it is unusual, if heartening, to see conservatives flocking to defend free speech but disturbing to hear them claim that the greatest enemies of free speech are liberals and progressives. To check on the sincerity of this change of heart, as well as to assess the relative dangers that left and right pose to free debate, it seems advisable to examine *conservative* attitudes to-

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29. P. 2 (commenting that professors and students continually "remind[] themselves to say 'high school women' instead of 'high school girls' ").
31. D'Souza, supra note 11, at 144-47.
33. After 12 years of conservative government, can we really believe in a liberal orthodoxy? The confident young Republicans in my classes seem fairly secure to me, as indeed they should, given that their comrades have controlled the Presidency for nearly half of their lives and may well control the federal courts for many years to come. In fact, until recently this was a country in which liberal politicians denied being liberal. Come to think of it, was Mr. Dukakis the first victim of PC?
ward free speech in universities. What do they think of Accuracy in Academia, the conservative pressure group formed specifically to go into college classrooms to insure that liberal opinions are not on show? They tell us they are horrified when students are disciplined for yelling racist and anti-Semitic insults at classmates in the middle of the night. Are they equally concerned about the expulsion of divestment demonstrators for occupying university offices? Or is protection of property so uncontested a value that—unlike protection from intentional infliction of emotional distress—it easily trumps free speech? The answer to all of these questions, in Mr. Berman’s analysis and elsewhere, is silence.

Finally, how can conservatives claim that speech codes are terrible and that victims of racist abuse should develop a thick skin, and then turn around and shed tears for the conservative student who says nothing about civil rights and abortion because he feels that others might disagree with him? There is an obvious inconsistency here, one that is hardly even acknowledged.

Each of these issues seems central to the free speech debate. Sadly, Mr. Berman’s introduction does not deal with any of them. But the problems do not end there. Even if one is against speech codes (and I am), surely this part of the indictment ought to be severable from the rest. After all, one can believe that universities should not restrict the speech of their students, without believing that Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker must be kept out of the “core” literature classes. Yet it has not been seen that way. In fact, Berman misses the fact that the PC Indictment is presented by the media substantially as conservative intellectuals originally packaged it. The fog of anecdotal evidence that claims to “prove” the repression of speech on campus can thus be used, analogically, to attack women’s studies or Afro-American studies, to dissuade the Smithsonian from suggesting that Native Americans may not have been treated terribly well, to undermine affirmative action programs or minority outreach programs, and to dissuade English departments from polluting the great canon of English literature with references to irrelevancies such as race or class. Anyone who supports these programs can be stereotyped as a humorless tool of prepackaged political ideology and an enemy of free speech to boot. Principled beliefs are represented as rote ideology. If there is a tentative consensus on some of these progressive ideas, it shows we have a repressive orthodoxy. If few people share them, it shows they are crazy. If blacks and women support a change, it’s out of mere self-interest. If white men support it, it must be out of guilt. Heads you lose, tails I win.

Notwithstanding Berman’s dark musings about the effects of dangerous foreign ideologies,34 the account I have just given of the PC Indictment shows the extent to which conservatives are actually criticizing two ideas that could hardly be more central to American intellectual life—egalitarianism and relativism. The idea that Lacan, Lévi-Strauss, or Lyotard are be-

34. See text accompanying notes 4 & 9 supra; see also pp. 12-19.
hind affirmative action plans, or even the move to bring the “Third World” into the curriculum, is laughable. Discrediting ideas by labeling them as foreign is an old tradition in the United States, but it is sad to see Berman fall for it.

Contradictions

Once one begins thinking about free speech, about intellectuals who use ostracism and public opinion to prevent the airing of views contrary to their own political beliefs, a certain suspicion begins to fall on the very writers who invented the PC Indictment. They tell us openly that they are against affirmative action, women's studies, and history written from any perspective other than the winner's. Then they tell us that their opponents are censorious and politically motivated. Surely the accusation cuts both ways. Surely the conservatives are using slogans and unpleasant stereotypes to prevent the expression of ideas they do not like. Allan Bloom, Dinesh D'Souza, and the rest are doing the very thing for which they criticize the liberals. Yet somehow the story never runs that way. One must pause in admiration at this triumph of media manipulation. Conservative intellectuals and think-tanks have packaged the story neatly, with an ironic hook (“Liberals are repressing speech!”), a voyeuristic, anti-intellectual thrill (“Look at the weird stuff they do in classrooms nowadays!”) and, occasionally, a little closet racism (“Imagine thinking that black America could produce a great writer!”). Once they got it all packaged up, they sold it to the media through a thousand columns and talk shows and op-ed pieces. Trumpeted so many times, the story begins to feed on itself, to generate its own publicity, to cow its opponents not by argument but by sheer repetition.

The central paradox of conservative criticisms of political correctness, the twist that makes the PC story so irresistible to American media across the political spectrum, is in the very last part of the PC Indictment: How could liberals be engaged in the suppression of free speech? But while criticizing the left for enforcing a repressive orthodoxy, conservatives themselves are trying to enforce a particular orthodoxy—the orthodoxy of an imaginary, unified Western culture, in which merit is adequately measured by our current methods and qualifications, and in which “the norm” shouldn't have to worry about how the exceptions feel.

This conflict comes through clearly in the prose of the conservative intellectuals. No matter how lofty the principles invoked, their attitude toward any cultural artifact from outside of the mainstream is completely dismissive. Although Mr. D'Souza quotes Mahatma Gandhi expressing an opinion of Western civilization, (“I think it would be a good idea.”35), no critical stance toward the effects of Western civilization is taken seriously for a moment. All who present such views are made to appear ridiculous, brainwashed ideologues—except, perhaps Gandhi, who appears safely encased in

35. D’Souza, supra note 11, at 59.
quotation marks at the head of one chapter and whose spirit is never allowed to contaminate D'Souza's text. Unfortunately, the PC Indictment takes a similarly dismissive attitude toward the experiences of historically subordinate groups. No one reading Illiberal Education, for example, would discover that some American universities had a 100 percent "affirmative action preference" for white students less than thirty years ago. In fact, an outsider could be forgiven for thinking conservatives are arguing that universities are too open to the works of black writers, but not open enough to racist speech. This apparent contradiction is not one on which Mr. Berman chooses to dwell.

When one knows a little about the biographies of these conservative pundits, one's uneasiness about the content of their arguments is heightened. One wonders how Mr. D'Souza can pooh-pooh the concerns of black students about racist speech, given his own background. When D'Souza was a student, the campus newspaper he edited published a "joke" photograph of a lynched black student hanging on the Dartmouth campus.36 Similar "jokes" included publishing the names of gay students who did not wish their sexuality to be a matter of public discussion—after those names had been taken from a list stolen from the gay student organization's office.37 When D'Souza attained the mature status of a graduate student at Princeton, he wrote an article which revealed the details of a woman student's sex life without her consent.38 The article was written for a magazine, Prospect, founded by "Concerned Alumni" not long after Princeton started to admit women.39 The person selected as editor of that magazine during Mr. D'Souza's time there was . . . Dinesh D'Souza.40 As Louis Menand put it in a book review written for The New Yorker, "It is not pleasant to see a man who did so much to poison the wells now turning up dressed as the water commissioner, and it will be apparent to most people who read Illiberal Education that the book's promise of balance is a false one."41

How does Berman's book deal with this fascinating piece of information? The book actually includes a transcript of an interview of Dinesh D'Souza by Robert MacNeil.42 Mr. MacNeil coyly refers to the fact that, as an editor of the Dartmouth Review, D'Souza published a number of articles that "appeared to exacerbate racial tensions there."43 (Presumably Tiananmen Square appeared to be a setback for democracy in China.) In response, D'Souza obfuscates and waffles. MacNeil quickly rescues him by offering the following redeeming interpretation: "But the motive was to stir it up and to get people talking about things that were considered impermissible at

37. Id.
38. Id. at 102.
39. Id. at 101.
40. Id. at 102.
41. Id. at 107.
43. P. 36 (emphasis added).
the time[?]" D'Souza agrees. A reader uninformed about the true background might have thought that D'Souza had made some mild critiques of affirmative action. Berman, who must surely have known the facts, offers in the name of balance the observation that D'Souza "writes for the conservative journals," fails to mention anything about his past, and seems to then group him with the "fair-minded academic crusaders" whose motives it would be "insulting" to question. He then devotes his considerable critical powers to an account of the visible tail and horns of Paul de Man. After all, de Man supported the Nazis and the failure of deconstructionists to recognize this fact casts doubt upon their methods. Without trying precisely to equate D'Souza's tolerance of ugly racism and homophobia to de Man's dangerous and venal anti-Semitism, am I peculiar in wanting a little editorial balance here?

In a similar vein, George Will speaks eloquently in favor of censoring 2 Live Crew. He writes that "a deeply confused society[ ] is more concerned about protecting lungs than minds, trout than black women." Yet when it comes to racist speech on campus, to words apparently more offensive to black women than those of 2 Live Crew's lyrics, his defense of censorship suddenly turns to a rousing support of the right of free speech. In the wake of incidents such as the disciplining of a Brown University student for drunkenly shouting racist epithets, Will condemned the liberals who would "gag free speech." This newfound tolerance does not extend, however, to challenges to the canon, or to the teaching of history which focuses attention away from "great men" toward those in subordinate positions. Berman includes an article by Will, Radical English, that excoriates attempts to bring questions of racism and sexism into the (essentially apolitical) realm of pedagogy in language and writing. Will is indeed a good candidate for inclusion, but, disappointingly, Berman never points out Will's curious double standard: opposing the censorship of racists who yell dirty words about blacks to an audience that does not want to hear, but supporting the censorship of black musicians who sing dirty (and viciously misogynist) words in front of a paying audience. What exactly is the principle that rationalizes these two positions?

What does Berman say about all of this? The answer, again, is nothing. When he momentarily contemplates the idea that the PC Indictment might be a politically motivated and racially loaded attack, he quickly apologizes.

44. P. 36.
45. P. 25.
47. Pp. 16-17.
48. George F. Will, America's Slide into the Sewer, Newsweek, July 30, 1990, at 64, 64.
49. George Will, On Campuses Liberals Would Gag Free Speech, Newsday, Nov. 6, 1989, at 62 ("The proliferating rules proscribe speech that 'slurs' or 'stereotypes' or 'stigmatizes' or 'victimizes.' The rules forbid giving offense to any group enjoying the coveted status of victim.").
51. P. 259 (criticizing "diversity education" as "an attempt to produce intellectual uniformity by promulgating political orthodoxy").
"It may sound insulting to the fair-minded academic crusaders against P.C. even to ask that question," 52 he writes. Several paragraphs later he dismisses the very possibility of a political or racist agenda by arguing that the anti-PC organization, the National Association of Scholars (NAS), has anecdotes to prove the PC Indictment. 53 This argument is a little puzzling, rather like citing the Republican party's literature to prove that the Democrats are bad. Berman further supports his surprising proposition by observing that some NAS members are not conservatives, and are "well-regarded." 54 Presumably Berman is referring to scholars such as Eugene Genovese, who seems to have completed the obligatory midlife conversion from Marxism to something more splenetically conservative and is now raging that Catholic universities which allow homosexuals on their campuses are "prostituting" themselves. 55 Another of Genovese's pet peeves is the atrocity committed against the great English language by those who think that language can be political. As far as I can tell, Genovese would find Berman's scrupulously gender neutral language to be just as offensive as the people he criticizes. Alternatively, Berman might be referring to C. Vann Woodward whose sympathetic review of D'Souza's book 56 was remarkable mainly for the facts it left out—strange for a scholar who was once so careful to unearth the information suppressed by the dominant understanding of events. 57 In the end, Berman's method—to quote one partisan in a debate to prove that the other side is wrong—is as troubling as his belief that his role is to repeat the imprecations and innuendo levelled at progressives while characterizing their opponents as "fair-minded academic crusaders" whose motives it would be "insulting" to question. 58 One wonders what the gay, black and Jewish students at Dartmouth would think about that argument. 59 Not to belabor the point, but Berman's claim of balance is demonstrably false.

If one acknowledges that Berman should have handled the conservatives with some of the skepticism he displays toward the liberals, what is one to think of the behavior of the conservative gurus? My point in reviewing the inconsistencies of the inventors of the PC Indictment is not to make an ad hominem attack. The contradictions I have just described are neither the result of individual mistake or personal inconsistency, nor even simply the result of hypocrisy. A central fault line runs through each of these conservative critiques: the contradiction between the simultaneous condemnation of a repressive liberal orthodoxy, and imposition of a conservative orthodoxy. The PC Indictment is an accusation at war with itself, and the war is one

54. P. 21.
59. See text accompanying notes 36-38 supra.
that reflects a corresponding schizophrenia in conservative notions of culture and Western values. D’Souza wants conservative students to be able to speak up without feeling uneasy, but he also wants the black students at Dartmouth to grin and bear it when his campus newspaper jokes about lynching them outside the affirmative action office. George Will wants the drunken student to be able to yell his racist or anti-Semitic imprecations without hindrance, but he also wants to censor 2 Live Crew and to impose a particular curriculum, vision of history, and method of pedagogy. The examples could be extended ad infinitum. Allan Bloom says he just wants us to give up our modern orthodoxies and to read the Great Books because they are the legacies of Western culture. Yet he wants us to read them his way—which isn’t an orthodoxy, just The Truth. This is the only way he can see to combat the dangerous Western traditions of relativism and egalitarianism. The conservatives want to save Western culture, but what are they saving? Is Western culture skeptical or reverential, iconoclastic or mythic? The contradiction reappears at each level of the argument.

If this were in fact a debate, this contradiction would be an interesting thing to discuss. But it is not a debate; it is a harangue, an indictment. At each level, the PC Indictment actually operates to do exactly the things the tenured radicals are accused of doing: to censor by caricature, to preempt discussion by stereotype. In the words of Jamin Raskin, one of my co-authors in a forthcoming book on the subject, “while the term ‘political correctness’ purports to describe censorious language or policies, it is in fact intended to render unspeakable and unthinkable whole categories of belief about power.” Unfortunately, the gloss that Paul Berman puts on this collection of excellent articles will do little to counter that intent. Perhaps equally disturbing is the fact that little or no attention is paid—either by Berman or in the media coverage of this issue—to the methods of teaching and scholarship suggested by the most able critics of PC. In other words, what are we supposed to be saving from the PC hordes?

THE UNEXAMINED IRONIES IN ANTI-PC CRITICISM OF CONTEMPORARY TEACHING AND SCHOLARSHIP

The PC Indictment is not just an attack on the administration of universities—on affirmative action in hiring or recruitment, on black theme houses, on women’s studies departments. It also contains a powerfully

60. Pp. 34-35.
61. See text accompanying note 36 supra.
62. See note 49 supra and accompanying text.
63. See text accompanying note 48 supra.
64. See notes 50-51 supra and accompanying text.
66. Id. at 374 (“The professors who now teach [the Great Books] do not care to defend them, are not interested in their truth.”).
stated, two prong critique of contemporary teaching and scholarship. The first critique of today's universities is that they do not teach the classics. The second prong of the criticism reframes the indictment. Universities don’t teach the classics enough, or if they do, they teach them through the lens of today’s distorting and ideologically loaded methods of interpretation, such as feminist theory and deconstruction. Roger Kimball is aghast that gender has been accepted as “a fundamental category of literary analysis.”\textsuperscript{68} Allan Bloom believes that feminism teaches women to go against nature, and is “[t]he latest enemy of the vitality of the classic texts.”\textsuperscript{69} Dinesh D'Souza feels that deconstructionist analyses of the great works are all froth and show—tendentious and idiosyncratic distortions of the great books to which they are applied.\textsuperscript{70} Teaching a feminist Austen, a deconstructionist Plato, or a postmodern Aristotle is as bad—perhaps worse—than not teaching the classics at all.

After such a concentrated attack on academic method, one might expect that Kimball et al. would lay out their own ideas of philosophical pedagogy, textual interpretation and moral philosophy—their own analyses of the right way to read Plato, Maimonides, and Machiavelli. Nothing could be further from the truth. Despite the fact that most contemporary critics of higher education tell us we must return to the traditional way of doing things, none of them seem terribly sure what that tradition is. This is hardly surprising. There is no single tradition of analysis and pedagogy in the humanities. In fact, one could make a strong argument that there has never been one. Both the canon and the ideal of scholarship and teaching have changed repeatedly through time.

From Allan Bloom one would expect more. He is a professional academic, a translator of Rousseau and Plato, and the author of numerous scholarly articles on intellectual history and philosophy. The Closing of the American Mind, his best selling indictment of American higher education, actually discusses Rousseau and Machiavelli, Plato and Hegel, rather than Berkeley and Amherst, Stanford and Harvard. Thus, it is to Allan Bloom that we would expect Paul Berman and other PC pundits to turn. Otherwise, how can they measure the idea of the Great Books against which contemporary teaching and scholarship is measured and found wanting?

So how does Bloom want us to treat the Great Books? Is he merely asking that we give them their plain meaning (whatever that might be), not “imposing” our own intellectual preconceptions on them? Bloom says that this is his aim,\textsuperscript{71} yet his book shows clearly that nothing could be further from the truth. The great irony behind Bloom’s attacks on bizarre, esoteric, elitist (and probably foreign) intellectual methods is that he would purge deconstruction and feminism from the academy, only to replace them with his own devoutly held set of beliefs about philosophy and interpretation—a

\textsuperscript{68} Kimball, supra note 13, at 16.
\textsuperscript{69} Bloom, supra note 10, at 65.
\textsuperscript{70} D’Souza, supra note 11, at 178-79.
\textsuperscript{71} Bloom, supra note 10, at 344; see also text accompanying note 87 infra.
method which to most people would seem even more bizarre, esoteric, elitist (and foreign, for that matter) than anything he criticizes. This method, or school, or ideology—it is hard to know exactly what to call it—goes by the name of Straussianism. It is a self-consciously and avowedly elitist philosophy, which works from the premise that there are truths out of the reach of the common man, that these truths are reserved for an elite (or perhaps two complementary elites—the philosophers and the gentlemen), and that these elites have a responsibility to govern society for the masses who have neither the understanding nor the moral capacity to rule themselves. The Great Books are the source of the truths which enable the gentlemen to rule and the philosophers to guide them—hence Bloom’s repeated, almost hypnotic insistence on the importance of Plato and the post-Socratic philosophers to higher education.

This shocking inconsistency is at the heart of the most influential conservative criticism of the academy. Bloom presents himself as a disinterested classicist lamenting the infusion of politically motivated methods of pedagogy and analysis into higher education. He is eloquent in his denunciation of modern scholarship, claiming that it preaches intellectual rigor and democratic values but is actually intellectually flabby and politically elitist. Perhaps his most disturbing charge is that scholars who apply these methods have no real interest in the texts they are supposed to be elucidating. According to Bloom (and to a lesser extent, Kimball and D'Souza) these new-fangled academics apply a self-confirming and tendentious method that uses whatever text comes to hand as a new vehicle for their elitist political message. And here we have the ultimate irony, for if any group in the academy deserves this charge it is of the Straussians, and Allan Bloom, their champion.

Leo Strauss’s message is that philosophers commonly and deliberately conceal their most important ideas so that those ideas can be discovered by only a privileged few. Strauss offered his students entry into that privileged group, a self-appointed philosophical elite who referred to themselves as “the few.” Of course, any good teacher gives students a greater understanding of the books they are reading, but Strauss was offering something different. He told his students that, out of fear of the uncomprehending masses

72. As one observer writes:
   It is no exaggeration to say that the impact of Leo Strauss on the academic community in North America is a phenomenon. He is the founder of a movement, a school of thought and even a cult. Leo Strauss wrote some 15 books and 80 articles. However, his notoriety is due not so much to the evident superiority of his work, but to the fervent devotion of his unusually ardent and zealous followers. Universities in Canada and the United States now abound with these disputatious, dogmatic and vehemently defensive disciples known as Straussians. They occupy high positions in almost all the universities in North America, and have, without a shadow of a doubt, become a ‘force’ to be reckoned with.

73. See, e.g., Bloom, supra note 10, at 264-68, 284-93, 381-82.
74. Id. at 336-82.
75. Id. at 345-46.
76. See generally id. at 62-67.
and dim-witted governments, the great philosophers and political theorists had written their works in code. Leo Strauss claimed to have the key to that code. It was this key, rather than the one to the executive washroom, which he offered to his students if only they would embrace his doctrine wholeheartedly.

The first part of Strauss' method is to reverse the normal process of interpretation, to value the unsaid over the said, the obscure over the clear, and to assume that philosophers routinely say exactly the opposite of what they really mean.77 (Interestingly, these tendencies are exactly the ones for which conservatives criticize the deconstructionists.) Strauss called the philosophers' apparent message their "exoteric" philosophy.78 While he did not say that the exoteric philosophy was worthless, he made it clear that, as the part of their treasure exposed to the view of the vulgar herd, it would certainly be the least precious of their thoughts and would often represent the very opposite of their true ideas.79

According to Strauss, society necessarily rests on a number of magnificent myths or noble lies.80 Philosophers—informed by what Strauss refers to as the spirit of Athens—see through these myths and realize that the principles underlying society are neither natural nor neutral.81 They realize that the social structure is a tissue of romance and delusion which operates to justify (or at least obscure) the true distribution of power. Strauss seems to be in agreement with many progressive social critics in this view. But the similarity stops here. Whereas the left tends to believe that democracy,

78. For example, Strauss stated:
Persecution, then, gives rise to a peculiar technique of writing, and therewith to a peculiar type of literature, in which the truth about all crucial things is presented exclusively between the lines. That literature is addressed, not to all readers, but to trustworthy and intelligent readers only. . . . [A]n author who wishes to address only thoughtful men has but to write in such a way that only a very careful reader can detect the meaning of his book.

Leo Strauss, Persecution and the Art of Writing 25 (1952).
79. Strauss, supra note 77, at 223 ("If a master of the art of writing commits such blunders as would shame an intelligent high-school boy, it is reasonable to assume that they are intentional, especially if the author discusses, however incidentally, the possibility of intentional blunders in writing."); see also Leo Strauss, Liberalism Ancient and Modern 140-84 (1968) (hereinafter Strauss, Liberalism) (offering an exegesis of Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed); Leo Strauss, Natural Right and History 165-67, 202-23 (1953) (hereinafter Strauss, Natural Right) (on the esoteric teaching of Locke); Leo Strauss, The Rebirth of Classical Political Rationalism 63-71 (1989) (on esoteric teaching generally); cf. Thomas Pangle, The Spirit of Modern Republicanism (1988) (offering an exegesis of Locke).
80. Strauss, supra note 77, at 221-22; see also Leo Strauss, Plato, in History of Political Philosophy 34 (3d ed. 1987); Strauss, supra note 77, at 222 ("To respect opinions is something entirely different from accepting them as true."). Strauss has also commented:

To justify philosophy before the tribunal of the political community means to justify philosophy in terms of the political community, that is to say, by means of a kind of argument which appeals not to philosophers as such, but to citizens as such . . . from generally accepted opinions.

Strass, supra note 77, at 93. For Strauss, "lying nobly" is "what we would call 'considering one's social responsibilities,' " Strauss, supra note 78, at 36.
81. Strauss, supra note 77, at 224 ("Things which are true of the highest intellects are wholly inapplicable to others.").
openness, and popular scrutiny are the best corrective for magnificent myths and noble lies, Strauss has very little respect for popular government. Instead, he thinks that the state must be run by the “gentlemen” who revere and cherish the myths of their society and the “philosophers” who train and instruct those gentlemen.  

Strauss' philosophers realize that the myths of a society (for example, Judeo-Christian religion, conventional morality, romantic love, and the naturalness of the nuclear family) are merely security blankets for the mob, comforting delusions for the vast majority. But they also believe that civilized society depends on these delusions for its survival, and they realize that their privileged position depends on perpetuating the hoax. This means that a Straussian philosopher (particularly a modern Straussian philosopher such as Allan Bloom) is caught in a strange dilemma. As the price of his freedom, he must not reveal that the emperor has no clothes. He must conceal this even from his natural ally, “the gentleman,” whose task it is to rule. The philosopher will derive his pleasure from the private knowledge that he is a member of a cabalistic few who can look into the abyss and not blink, a few who realize “nothing is forbidden.” In public, however, the philosopher will continue to spout the platitudes and homilies of conventional morality and to defend tradition in education, governance, and family life. The philosopher will seem like a worthy defender of conservative tradition, while he inwardly feels a condescending amusement toward the poor mortals who believe these fairy tales.

82. For example, Strauss writes:

“Constitutional” authority ought to be given to the equitable men (epitelekeis), i.e., to gentlemen—preferably an urban patriciate which derives its income form the cultivation of its landed estates... [In the absence of absolute rule of the wise on the one hand, and on the other hand of a degree of abundance which is possible only on the basis of unlimited technological progress with all its terrible hazards, the apparently just alternative to aristocracy open or disguised will be permanent revolution, i.e., permanent chaos in which life will be not only poor and short but brutish as well.

Strauss, supra note 77, at 113; see also Strauss, Natural Right, supra note 79, at 143; Leo Strauss, What Is Liberal Education?, in Strauss, Liberalism, supra note 79, at 5-6, 15-17. The philosophers associate with this “natural elite” but do not join them:

Since the philosopher is the man who devotes his whole life to the quest for wisdom, he has no time for political activity of any kind: the philosopher cannot possibly desire to rule.

His only demand on the political men is that they leave him alone. ... The philosopher cannot lead an absolutely solitary life because legitimate “subjective certainty” and the “subjective certainty” of the lunatic are indistinguishable. ... [The philosopher is as philosopher in need of friends. To be of service to the philosopher in his philosophizing, the friends must be competent men: they must themselves be actual or potential philosophers, i.e., members of the natural “elite.”]

Strauss, supra note 77, at 113-14.

83. Strauss, supra note 78, at 36 (“Exoteric literature presupposes that there are basic truths which would not be pronounced in public by any decent man, because they would do harm to many people who, having been hurt, would naturally be inclined to hurt in turn him who pronounces these unpleasant truths.”); see also Strauss, supra note 77, at 221.

84. Strauss, supra note 77, at 92-94, 125-26; Strauss, Natural Right, supra note 79, at 143 (“The common people had no sympathy for philosophy and philosophers. As Cicero put it, philosophy was suspect to the many.”). The Straussian tenet of the eternal antagonism between philosophers and the mob is highly reflective of the death of Socrates according to Strauss. See generally Leo Strauss, City and Man (1964); Strauss, supra note 77, at 92-94, 120, 125-26.
What conclusion should we draw from this complacent and elitist justification of disingenuous traditionalism? Although Allan Bloom is one of the foremost Straussians in American academia, he is best known for his defense of educational tradition. What should we think when Strauss tells us that none of his disciples really believe in the traditional values they promote? Knowing these values to be false, they defend them disingenuously with the aim of supporting the stability of society and the rule of the elite. At the very least we should wonder about Bloom's true feelings when he wrote *The Closing of the American Mind*.

The uninformed reader might doubt the accuracy of this portrayal. If the philosophers, from Socrates to the present day, spend their time disguising their true ideas and saying the opposite of what they really think, how are they ever going to communicate with each other? According to Strauss the answer is that underneath their "exoteric" or obvious and shallow philosophy, lies another secret or "esoteric" philosophy—concealed from all but the eyes of the elite. In Strauss' own words, philosophers who agree with him:

> are driven to employ a peculiar manner of writing which would enable them to reveal what they regard as the truth to the few, without endangering the unqualified commitment of the many to the opinions on which society rests. They will distinguish between the true teaching as the esoteric teaching and the socially useful teaching as the exoteric teaching; whereas the exoteric teaching is meant to be easily accessible to every reader, the esoteric teaching discloses itself only to very careful and well-trained readers after long and concentrated study.85

How are we to discover this esoteric philosophy? Strauss' answer is an odd one, a mixture of Burke and Freud and numerology. If the philosopher denies a tenet of Straussianism—such as the inability of a society to survive without authoritarian myths—Strauss will treat the denial as confirmation of his thesis. *(Obviously, the author is hiding something.)* If the philosopher agrees with one of Strauss's tenets, this is also treated as confirmation. *(For once, the author was being honest.)* Strauss is also fond of interpretive techniques which, to a skeptic, seem reminiscent of the lamp and the decoder ring. For example, he will count the number of chapters in a book or paragraphs in a section, and claim that the numerical center is also the central *idea*. Turning to Strauss' own style of writing, we find that his analyses of other thinkers are couched in the kind of prose one would expect from someone who believes that the best truths are the deepest buried. Uninitiated readers find themselves entering a strange world, deliberately obscure, full of in-jokes and cliché terms. One thing they will not find is sustained philosophical argument. Despite his odes of praise to philosophy, Strauss is comparatively indifferent to actual philosophical argument, perhaps because his method of interpretation will allow him to wring a conservative social philosophy out of any words and any argument.

Reading Bloom's description of the current state of the university curric-

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85. STRAUSS, supra note 77, at 222.
ulum, it is easy to see why his book became a bestseller. He speaks with an
evident passion about his subject, ridiculing the great universities which can
win Nobel prizes and split the atom but cannot solve the question of general
education. He is far from complimentary about the society he lives in. He
paints a sad picture of the “intellectual desert” which awaits even his more
fortunate students. All they have to look forward to is a public realm devoid
of culture and a narrow and routinized professional life, untouched by the
highest creations of civilization. This makes the four years in the university
all the more vital for his students. He writes, “The importance of these years
for an American cannot be overestimated. They are civilization’s only
chance to get to him.”86 How do we save the American student from cul-
tural barbarism? From Bloom’s perspective, there is only one answer:

Of course, the only serious solution is the one that is almost universally
rejected: the good old Great Books approach, in which a liberal education
means reading certain generally recognized classic texts, just reading them,
letting them dictate what the questions are and the method of approaching
them—not forcing them into categories we make up, not treating them as
historical products, but trying to read them as their authors wished them to
be read.87

Notice that Bloom is not merely advocating the reading of the great
books. Universities already do expose their students to a wide range of clas-
sic texts. He is also telling us that we must read them in a particular way—
without historical context or interpretive categories and just as their authors
intended. There is something immediately puzzling in this prescription.
How can he ask us to read the Great Books as their authors wished them to
be read, without treating the books as historical products? How can one
presume to know exactly how Plato meant The Republic to be read without
any understanding of what philosophy meant in Plato’s time, what condi-
tions Plato was writing under, what opponents he was arguing against?
Without some historical understanding of the conditions of Plato’s life, how
could we begin to make sense of Bloom’s belief that Plato was hiding the
most important part of his ideas, lest it lead to a backlash from the authori-
ties? We cannot.

What kind of message are students supposed to be getting from this diet
of great books? At first, Bloom’s message seems to be a critical one. He
talks of the epiphany he had within the “fake Gothic buildings” of the Uni-
versity of Chicago88—the realization that the university could be a “trans-
forming experience,” opening one up to the possibility that “there were
serious ends of which we had not heard.”89 Bloom also appears to be seri-
ously interested in the problems of censorship and intellectual freedom, the
very issues around which liberals in academia have traditionally rallied. He
believes that the single most important message for philosophy to ponder is

86. Bloom, supra note 10, at 336.
87. Id. at 344.
88. Id. at 243.
89. Id. at 244.
the message offered by the story of Socrates—put to death because his beliefs were judged to be corrupting the youth of the city. "The meditation on Socrates is the inspiring theme of philosophy from Plato and Aristotle, through Farabi and Maimonides, Machiavelli, Bacon, Descartes, Spinoza, Locke, Rousseau and Hegel, to Nietzsche and Heidegger."90 In this, he is echoing the thoughts of Leo Strauss, but he does so in a way that gains the reader's sympathy by focusing on the critical, demystifying side of Strauss' picture of philosophy. Like Strauss, Bloom believes that philosophy will mean "[f]reedom from the myths and their insistence that piety is best."91 In words that Strauss himself might have written, he paints a picture of the conflict between the clear-eyed philosopher and the nonphilosophical citizen who does not reflect critically on the institutions and myths of his society:

Nonphilosophic men love the truth only as long as it does not conflict with what they cherish—self, family, country, fame, love. When it does conflict, they hate the truth and regard as a monster the man who does not care for these noble things, who proves they are ephemeral and treats them as such.92

To most of Bloom's readers these passages seem a mere repetition of the classic Enlightenment defense of liberal education through the Great Books: Such an education will inculcate an inquisitive spirit and a skepticism about beliefs that the society takes for granted. Thus, (a widely available) liberal education will provide a constant stream of intelligent and energetic young people from all kinds of cultures and economic backgrounds, whose minds will weigh anew the beliefs of their society. On closer examination, however, Bloom's concern with transformative, critical philosophy is no more than the Straussian party line—using exactly the same jargon, illustrative thinkers, and idiosyncratic intellectual history.

In fact, Bloom's point is actually the exact opposite of the liberal idea of the humanities. He thinks that the charges raised against Socrates—corruption of the youth and impiety—were probably true, or at least that they are supported by the evidence.93 When Socrates asserts the importance of philosophy, but defends himself by trying to reduce the conflict between it and citizenship, Bloom accuses him of temporizing and being insincere.94 A Straussian knows, of course, that these claims are insincere because it is an article of faith of Straussianism that philosophy will always threaten citizenship. Realizing that their truths are too heady for the masses, Bloom tells us:

[P]hilosophers engaged in a gentle art of deception. There is no leaving civil society, no matter what Thoreau may have thought. But they cannot avoid being noticed. They are different. Therefore philosophers allied themselves with the gentlemen, making themselves useful to them, never

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90. Id. at 268.
91. Id. at 271.
92. Id. at 277-78.
93. Id. at 275.
94. Id. at 277-79.
quite revealing themselves to them, strengthening their gentleness and openness by reforming their education.95

Displaying once more the complacent elitism that puzzled some of the reviewers of his book, but which would have been very familiar to Leo Strauss, Bloom writes, "Why are the gentlemen more open than the people? Because they have money and hence leisure and can appreciate the beautiful and useless. And because they despise necessity."96 Bloom even repeats, almost word for word, the Straussian defense of the philosopher’s dissembling: "The philosopher wants to know things as they are. He loves the truth. That is an intellectual virtue. He does not love to tell the truth. That is a moral virtue."97 It would be interesting to know what impact these opinions would make on those who praise Bloom as the brave conservative defender of the humanities, free inquiry, and a "natural," apolitical reading of the Great Books. With friends like these, does classical philosophy need tenured radical enemies to throw it into doubt?

Bloom’s dissembling, secret philosopher kings have no great love for democracy and egalitarianism. If there is one value that Bloom attacks consistently throughout The Closing of the American Mind, it is equality. Indeed, his main defense of the university is that it is the last refuge of hierarchical aristocratic ideas, in a society otherwise relentlessly democratic. In his view, the trouble with the United States is that it has done too good a job in expurgating inequality. Given his Straussian beliefs about natural elites, this is an achievement about which Bloom has very mixed feelings. He writes, "Not only slavery, but aristocracy, monarchy and theocracy were laid to rest by the Declaration and the Constitution. This was very good for our domestic tranquility, but not very encouraging for theoretical doubts about triumphant equality."98 In order to promote those doubts and to bring students to challenge our democratic orthodoxy in an appropriately Straussian fashion, "the university must come to the aid of unprotected and timid reason"99 by cloaking the defense of inequality with the authority of the ancients.

The Great Books have traditionally been hailed as a staple of education because they are thought to bring about a rich flowering of the student’s spirit—to inculcate a reverent humility for our own frailties, a realization of our common humanity, and a modesty about the limitations to our knowledge. This side of the humanities is epitomized by Michel Montaigne and his famous medal, which said simply, "Que sais je?" ("What do I know?") Allan Bloom agrees that reading the Great Books will lead to a transformation of his students’ spirits, but one that has little to do with humility. Students who have absorbed Bloom’s deepest message about the teachings of the Great Thinkers and who have come to see themselves as Straussian phi-

95. Id. at 279.
96. Id.
97. Id. (emphasis added).
98. Id. at 248.
99. Id.
losophers will carry a sense of their own overwhelming importance into their relationships with others. They know they have no possibility of sharing their knowledge with the wider populace. Bloom even seems to imagine that they are a kind of master race, genetically superior to the common herd: "[The philosopher] is, therefore, necessarily in the most fundamental tension with everyone except his own kind . . . . Changing the character of his relationship with [those who are not of his kind] is impossible because the disproportion between him and them is firmly rooted in nature." The idea that this is the great savior of liberal education speaking has a certain irony to it.

As Bloom completes his lightning tour of the Great Books which are to form the core of liberal education, it becomes apparent that the Straussian world view he puts forward has an effect beyond his conception of education, beyond even his notion of the fraternity of philosophers. If students were to absorb Allan Bloom's "natural" and unprejudiced account of Socrates' life, they should conclude that philosophy is only contemplative. Philosophy is not intended to have, and should not have, an effect upon the world. Bloom says explicitly that speaking about the good, not doing it, is what he wants to encourage.

Again, one senses an idea that might puzzle those who believe that the conservatives are defending the great tradition of the humanities. The knowledge we cull from the Great Books should not be used to expose injustice or to puncture prejudice. Philosophers should not even try to talk about truths, except with those who are already on the road to conversion. Although Bloom wants to encourage philosophers to talk rather than act, he wants them to talk only amongst their own kind, remaining silent in popular debate—even when their ideas are directly implicated. After all, "[t]he important thing is not speaking one's own mind, but finding a way to have one's own mind"—or, in this case, the mind that Strauss and Bloom prescribe for you. Ferment on the interior, and a pretended orthodoxy on the exterior. But what are you going to do with this mind, once you have it, if you can't speak the truth except to those who already agree with you? Bloom's students begin to sound more like solipsists than philosopher kings. Speaking up will only anger the gentlemen who have been the inattentive allies of philosophy for 2000 years, and this is the last thing we would want to do. Bloom says he "bless[es] a society that tolerates and supports an eternal childhood for some." Provided that he gets to be one of those whose eternal childhood is supported, he seems willing to keep quiet, practicing instead the "gentle art of deception." At best, philosophy can have a leavening effect on the characters of the ruling "gentlemen," whose natures have already been made subtle and sensitive by wealth, leisure, and freedom from necessity.

100. Id. at 282 (emphasis added).
101. Id. at 381-82.
102. Id. at 266.
103. Id. at 245.
104. Id. at 279.
What are we to conclude from this? Bloom claims that he wants to revive the classic tradition of liberal education in the humanities—to give us back a canon unbesmirched by politics, history, or ideology. But he does not really want us to read Plato without any historical context. He wants us to read Plato within his imagined historical context, or rather, that of Leo Strauss. Worse still, he doesn’t want to admit that it is this historical context which gives meaning and life to his ideas, because to do so would be to admit others into the debate over the meaning of the Great Books. Academics normally are fond of debate but Bloom is not keen on it. Debate smacks too much of relativism for Bloom—unless, of course, the terms of the debate stipulate that he is speaking with the true authority of the ancients while his opponents can offer only trendy and unreflective opinion.

When I see Paul Berman or the National Association of Scholars or Time or Newsweek repeating Bloom’s critiques as if they were established fact, I want to say, “Have you ever read this man, or the mentor whose ideas he reproduces almost verbatim?” One begins Mr. Bloom’s The Closing of the American Mind believing that the title is his lament for American education. One finishes it believing that those words accurately describe his goal. Mr. Berman’s “fair-minded academic crusaders” should pause at the thought that this book is the Ur-source of the humanities against the PC hordes.

TWO GRAINS OF TRUTH

The PC Indictment may be politically motivated, internally contradictory, and marked by shoddy reporting and personal inconsistency. The conservative architects of the indictment may practice exactly the kind of elitist, deconstructionist reading of which they accuse their enemies. Nevertheless, it is not all wrong. There are two grains of truth in the vast porridge of accusations that have been spooned onto our plates by the media. For one thing, the left does sometimes engage in silly, formalistic, and censorious politics. (Unlike the right or the center which, as we know, are immune from pomposity, censoriousness, or ideological narrowness.) There is a tendency for campus politics to be played out in a way that is unconnected to other areas of social life, or to any conceivable transformation of the lives students will have after graduation. One may or may not think that a student who organizes a protest about a poster for a “back to the ‘50s dance” is engaged in worthwhile political activity. But there is also a more important question: Is this action linked—both intellectually and practically—to a community of kindred spirits and a vision of herself as a moral and political actor that, together, will help her be a moral person under the pressures of the world of work? How many students leave the campus and its protest over dance posters, only to go to work for the advertising agency that is trying to target a cigarette at young black women? Without roots in practical activity and lived experience, campus politics becomes a ritualistic invocation of formal

105. Id. at 380-82.
rules—rules to be enforced by liberal administrators. The administration is treated as the functional equivalent of the state. One makes an argument to a surly but munificent university bureaucracy, and a new “sensitivity” workshop is set up.

There is irony in this. Much of radical thought began as a critique of classical liberalism for its formalistic categories, its spurious claims to neutrality, its fetishism of the state, and its blindness to the abuse of private power. In a familiar pattern, however, leftists seem to recreate exactly those features in their own politics. Important insights about the politics of language are robbed of their power by being converted into lifeless rules of deportment. Incisive critiques of hateful behavior are defused or undermined when they turn into procedural arguments about mechanisms of institutional restraint. Fleeing from a deadened, lifeless politics of spuriously neutral rules, a politics that addresses itself to imaginary state decisionmakers rather than to our fellow citizens, we should take care lest we find ourselves acting out the same patterns—with a reified notion of diversity as our principle and the university administration taking the role of the state.

A second point worth thinking about comes from the PC Indictment’s invocation of the ideal of universalism. Ever since Benda’s 1928 *La Trahison des Clercs*, a principal right wing critique of leftism (and particularly academic leftism) has been that it represents a dangerous challenge to universal values. Benda began his book with an epigram from Renouvier, “The world is suffering from lack of faith in a transcendental truth,” and he maintains this theme unsparingly through each page that follows.106 Replace Benda’s ironic use of the term “clerks” with Kimball’s “tenured radicals” and the chapter headings from his book form a neat summary of today’s accusations. *The clerks have adopted political passions. They bring those passions into their lives as clerks. The clerks praise attachment to the particular and denounce the feeling of the universal. The clerks praise attachment to the practical and denounce the love of the spiritual.*107 This could be Dinesh D’Souza attacking multiculturalism, or Allan Bloom excoriating identity politics.

And what of it? The accusation is at least partly true. Leftists sometimes argue that different groups are differently situated in society and therefore a universalist politics will merely replicate the most hateful structures of contemporary life. Affirmative action is a case in point, as is the justification for regulating hate speech directed at subordinate groups. It would be hard to find anyone who wouldn’t sometimes agree with the propriety of focusing on the situation of the particular group rather than the universal norm—questioning whether race neutral criteria really work in a race neutral way in a society organized like ours; exploring whether all speech can be treated in exactly the same way; or debating the efficacy of integrationist strategies. I

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107. Id. at viii.
believe that there is widespread hypocrisy about these supposedly universalist principles, and that the left should expose such hypocrisy, often and loudly. Even Nat Hentoff would probably accept differential regulation of speech according to the identity of the speaker and the site of the speech (e.g., TV cigarette commercials). But leaving aside the behavior of others, how should progressives respond when conservatives criticize them for abandoning the idea of universal principles and focusing illegitimately on the particular? To my mind, the answer is neither to embrace the empty morality of formal equality, nor to rush toward a Balkanized politics of individual groups, each clinging to a romanticized essential identity. If the PC Indictment has spurred us to rethink our own politics, then it may have accomplished a useful thing—for all of its contradictory, disingenuous, politically repressive posturing.

Paul Berman notwithstanding, we may believe in postmodern identity politics. We may believe that we are all cross-cutting assemblages of race and gender and class. Some of us may even believe, as Gary Peller argues, that we should move toward more rather than less race consciousness, toward black nationalism rather than toward the integrationist goals of 1960s liberalism. Others may find the vision of black nationalism to be as romanticized as the Central European nationalism of the 1920s. Regardless of the place we draw the line, most of us have some belief in the importance of focusing on the oppression of groups. But why do we believe that? We believe it in part because we think that one of the things wrong with this society is that one can predict, all too accurately, the trajectory of an individual life merely by knowing a few things about the person’s race, gender, and class. Part of our politics comes from resistance to the tyranny of poverty, the tyranny of sex roles, the tyranny of race stereotypes, and the political economy of racial subordination. And what is that politics but an iconoclastic expression of the moral ideal that we should never be the helpless puppets of our demographic labels? Identity politics, too, is constructed in a precarious latticework between the particular and the universal.

Where does all of this leave us? When George Will tells us that he knows which books are the Great Books, we should doubt him. When Dinesh D’Souza tells us that equality is the enemy of quality, we should challenge his complacent assumptions about merit. When Allan Bloom chooses to draw a veil over his own far-fetched elitist methods of interpretation, while hurling those same epithets at others, we should point out the inconsistency. (Goodness knows, the mainstream press isn’t going to.) But when Bloom presents the idea that the function of an education is in part to offer us the possibility to transcend the false objectivity of our demographic signifiers, to be more than “a white man” or “a black woman,” we should agree. For Bloom, that idea points to a continuation of a system in which

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the white middle class teaches the white middle class the same books it has always taught, in a university disconnected from society and in a political landscape taken for granted. The conclusions I draw from his idea are more sweeping. A university education should help us see through the things our society takes for granted—and not just by reading good books. We can challenge our preconceptions by reading Montaigne, but also by being taught by a faculty with a variety of beliefs and life experiences, or by integrating community service into the curriculum. For Bloom, the goal of liberal education points to a remade reading list. For progressives, it points to a remade society.

There is one final irony to the story. The critics of PC denounce the Patricia Williamses and the Noam Chomskys of the world as being traitors to the ideal of liberal education. But when you read Bloom and D'Souza you find that theirs is a liberal education that has been killed, stuffed, and mounted. Liberal education is a remarkably iconoclastic ideal, not so easily rid of its connections to the ideals of radical skepticism, justice, and the life well-lived in the service of others. I would be reluctant to designate any group as the true heirs of liberal education, but if I had to pick, my money would be on Williams and Chomsky rather than D'Souza and Bloom.