

THE HERITAGE LECTURES

337

**Political
Correctness and
the Suicide
of the Intellect**

By Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr.



The Heritage Foundation was established in 1973 as a non-partisan, tax-exempt policy research institute dedicated to the principles of free competitive enterprise, limited government, individual liberty, and a strong national defense. The Foundation's research and study programs are designed to make the voices of responsible conservatism heard in Washington, D.C., throughout the United States, and in the capitals of the world.

Heritage publishes its research in a variety of formats for the benefit of policy makers; the communications media; the academic, business, and financial communities; and the public at large. Over the past five years alone The Heritage Foundation has published some 1,500 books, monographs, and studies, ranging in size from the 927-page government blueprint, *Mandate for Leadership III: Policy Strategies for the 1990s*, to the more frequent "Critical Issues" monographs and the topical "Backgrounders," "Issue Bulletins," and "Talking Points" papers. Heritage's other regular publications include the *Business/Education Insider*, *Mexico Watch*, and *Policy Review*, a quarterly journal of analysis and opinion.

In addition to the printed word, Heritage regularly brings together national and international opinion leaders and policy makers to discuss issues and ideas in a continuing series of seminars, lectures, debates, briefings, and conferences.

Heritage is classified as a Section 501(c)(3) organization under the Internal Revenue Code of 1954, and is recognized as a publicly supported organization described in Section 509(a)(1) and 170(b)(1)(A)(vi) of the Code. Individuals, corporations, companies, associations, and foundations are eligible to support the work of The Heritage Foundation through tax-deductible gifts.

Note: Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002-4999
U.S.A.
202/546-4400

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS AND THE SUICIDE OF THE INTELLECT

by Harvey C. Mansfield Jr.

Political correctness, you all should know, is a term that seems to come from students, not from faculty. I told my son about the new phrase I was hearing from my colleagues, and he said, "Oh, we used to say that three or four years ago." Ultimately I suppose political correctness comes from the Communist Party, where one presumes it was not used sarcastically.

Now political correctness is connected to politicization. The university is politicized, the politicizers say. But they do not recoil, appalled at their conclusion that every scholar deep down is a politician. Nor do they try to minimize the fact which they've uncovered. No, they embrace it. They furthermore say, "It's necessary to replace the politics we've had up to now with our politics, or, rather, my politics." This is a claim of tyranny, somewhat disguised by the demand in the speech of the politicizers to democratize everything.

Politicization, therefore, leads to political correctness, the new orthodoxy to replace the old one. And those who speak of it are quite open about it: We must give scholarship, we must give the university a progressive perspective, an ethnic one, a homophobic one, and so on. Scholarship must not only be inspired by, but infused with, political correctness.

Now these two things – politicization and PC – are manifest in three aspects of the universities: first, in the admission of students and recruitment of faculty, and the related question of affirmative action; second, in campus life and the demand for sensitivity; and third, in the curriculum and the criticism of the traditional canon.

Affirmative action I won't discuss, except to mention the two parts of the questions that I think are raised by the politicization of campus life: first, justice; and second, pride.

As to the justice of affirmative action, I think that to most people it's gradually sinking in that two wrongs don't make a right. And as to the matter of pride, affirmative action is the only government program that's ashamed of itself and that cannot identify its beneficiaries: "Here is the new affirmative action candidate we've just found." That cannot be said, of course, without hurting the candidate's pride.

Harvey C. Mansfield, Jr. is *Frank G. Thomson professor of government at Harvard University.*

Dr. Mansfield's remarks were delivered to an audience of Salvatori Fellows at a colloquium sponsored by the Heritage Foundation on June 26, 1991 at the University Club in Washington, D.C.

ISSN 0272-1155. ©1991 by The Heritage Foundation.

Affirmative action is perhaps not yet on the run, but I think it's on the defensive. It's of course very strong in the universities, entrenched in bureaucracy. Everything else will be excused there, even certain conservative views, if you accept affirmative action. But the new Harvard president, I was encouraged to see, has said that the problem of affirmative action is a problem of supply, of finding sufficient and qualified minorities. The suggestion is, therefore, that it's not a question of recruitment. (Of course, the original premise of affirmative action is that the problem is not supply, but rather in the racism – conscious or unconscious – of the recruiters.) So I think that's a considerable advance.

I turn now to the politicization of campus life. We've become familiar with speech codes on the campus that require students and faculty to avoid speech that may be offensive to certain groups. These have been set up in many universities, not yet at mine, Harvard, which does, however, have regulations on sexual harassment, requiring professors to teach classes "without unnecessarily drawing attention to the sexual difference."

What about the use of "he or she"? Would that kind of speech be required to avoid sexually harassing your audience? That usage to me seems compulsive and ridiculous. Ridiculous because "he or she" is a formula intended to draw attention away from the sexual difference, and instead it does the opposite. Indeed, this new usage seems to say that there is no impersonal pronoun, and it is based on the premise of feminism, or at least of the original feminism. Everywhere there is a "he" you could put a "she," and everywhere there's a "she" you could put a "he." In other words, it is based on the interchangeability of the sexes.

It's also compulsive. The most recent example of this I saw was in a letter from our chairman, in which he spoke of "anyone worth his or her salt."

"He or she" is, I think, a prime example of political correctness and the way it works, which is not confined to universities, or even to ideologues. It's an attempt to create an atmosphere of self-censorship, also known euphemistically as "raising consciousness."

Self-expression at Harvard. There was a sensitivity incident – widely reported – at Harvard this last spring. A young woman put out a Confederate flag from her dormitory window as an act of self-expression to display her political views. She was attacked as insensitive to the opinions of others, and she was defended as giving us an instance of free speech, which, of course, has been expanded, as we all know, to "free expression." Harvard did nothing to prevent this young woman from hanging out her flag. It accepted the reason why she did it. It spoke of the right of free expression, but deplored this particular use of it. This was very much, I think, in line with the policy of the American Civil Liberties Union.

Question: should conservatives – or, rephrase that: should reasonable or sensible people – adopt the ACLU view of this matter? A short-term alliance with them might be all right, but what about their view? I think not. It's time to reconsider the identification of free speech with free expression. Of course, I'm not the first to suggest

this; Justice Scalia has been making the point for some time. This identification first began with the Flag Salute cases in the early 1940s; so it has a history.

Free speech is something necessarily associated with reason; it's offering an opinion containing a reason. When you give a reason, you give some common ground, offered to convince or persuade someone else. It's not me imposing on you. Therefore free speech implies a community, a common citizenship. The original purpose of free speech was to make possible democratic government: How can we get together to decide things if we don't have the capacity to speak freely before and during our deliberations?

Free speech makes you think of someone else. Even if you have a selfish reason, you must claim that the other person would do the same. A man comes to a fancy dinner party. A plate of asparagus is passed around, and he cuts off all of the tips and sweeps them onto his plate. The lady sitting next to him looks at him in horror and says, "Why, sir, why ever did you do that?" "Because, madame, they're much the best part."

Now, "free expression," by contrast with this example of sweet reason, is self-centered: You express yourself, and you express yourself as opposed to others. It's my identity, my roots, my values. The Harvard student was from Virginia, and she hung out the Confederate flag to celebrate George Washington's birthday. George Washington led a movement for secession from Britain, so he would have therefore approved the movement of secession of the South in 1860!

The Right to offend. With self-expression you have no duty to placate or appease other people. If you do that, you're not being honest to yourself. So self-expression culminates in the right to offend. It doesn't matter that this student had so much trouble in identifying herself, in finding her ethnicity, that she had to go searching in the Confederacy.

The student was offending black students at Harvard. She didn't mean to, or so she said, but this wasn't believed. And the black students had a right therefore to take offense at this. One of them put out a Nazi flag. Well, it's hard to see the meaning of that, but it's clear that this student wanted to do her worst. You take offense by giving offense.

This is not a recipe for a happy, or even for a stable, society, not to mention a university. Such a system can work only through the forbearance of certain groups who give up their right to give and take offense. Some groups have a right to offend; others don't. And the point of the Confederate flag was to challenge that arbitrary system.

The ACLU doctrine, the identification of free speech with free expression, leads to this result: Do your worst, because you're not free unless you can carry freedom to an extreme; rather to an unhealthy extreme, indeed, to an *admittedly* unhealthy extreme.

Besides, the identification of free speech with free expression is open to the possibility of reversal. Instead of considering the Confederate flag as symbolic speech – that is, understanding expression as speech – you might consider a tirade of racial slurs as an expressive act – that is, understanding speech as a deed. And then, logically, you could prevent the speech, because it amounts to an offensive action. That's what Brown

University did recently in expelling a student. Because almost all human actions are capable of some meaning or some imputation of meaning, it's hard to draw a line between meaningful free speech and a meaningful act. Therefore, I think, it's foolish to throw away the distinction between speech and expression. It's a difficult distinction in theory, but in practice it makes sense.

Academic Freedom. And another distinction is needed, one between free speech and academic freedom. The purpose of free speech is to make democratic government possible. The purpose of academic freedom is to further inquiry. Inquiry means becoming more aware, not becoming more sensitive, and being "aware" means being open-minded to what is new, and is reflected in a desire to learn.

Giving and taking offense is especially inappropriate to a campus. It's perhaps part of politics, but certainly not part of inquiry. Unlimited free inquiry requires courtesy, academic etiquette. Miss Manners made this point recently, and I think very correctly. There should be, I think, no right to protest at universities. There should be, on the contrary, a duty *to listen*. Universities should teach courtesy and require it of their students. But, of course, professors should feel free to embarrass the hell out of their students, to shame them for their lack of knowledge. The end of education is greater awareness, greater openness, not greater sensitivity.

Education is a drawing-out, literally. It doesn't mean finding your roots in the sense of creating your values. Those things are pre-rational. Too many students nowadays come to universities to find out where they're coming from instead of where they're going. In education, your goal is more important than your roots.

Academic freedom is more wide-ranging than free speech; in principle it is unlimited. Academic freedom, for example, would take up the question whether democracy is a good thing; whether all men really have been created equal. Under a healthy regime of free speech, these questions might be taken for granted in a liberal democracy.

But academic freedom also requires greater decorum than free speech in society at large. The right to speak, therefore, must in universities be accompanied by the duty to listen.

Now to my third point, the curriculum and the canon. This arises out of the question of academic freedom. The politicizers speak of a traditional curriculum – the great books – as a "canon." When they use this term they compare a university curriculum to the decision of the Catholic Church as to what writings are the word of God. The implication is that the curriculum is an authoritative decision in favor of certain books that uphold the power of the decision makers. Living white males require the reading of books authored by dead white males. We should not accept this tendentious term, canon. It's an example of what it claims to deplore, an arbitrary and authoritative decision given without reason.

There's no need, I think, to defend the traditional curriculum or great books curriculum as untouchable or unchangeable. Paul Cantor at the University of Virginia has recently made this point. There are perhaps great authors in our time, even in the Third World: Vargas Llosa, Salman Rushdie. William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor and

John Steinbeck are American classics, not so long in their graves. We should keep an open mind, examine candidates for inclusion, but on the basis of their quality, not of their PC.

There's another reason not to be so touchy about Western civilization: All civilization is more or less Western now. Western civilization is a relatively new expression, dating, I think, from the late 19th century, characteristic of an historical – or, rather, historicist – way of thinking. It makes it seem as if the essence of our civilization is merely its location on the globe, "west of east." The distinction between "west and east" gives a hint of the uniqueness of the West. But it's necessary, especially now, to be a little bit more explicit.

It's fashionable today to doubt the value of the great books because they do not promote equal rights against discrimination by sex, life-style, and race. Another objection is that they are ethnocentric, because they're Western. You can use the second objection against the first. In no *Eastern* classic will the principle of equal rights be found. That principle is best argued in Western classics, authored, generally, by bourgeois white males.

Self-criticism. Let us define "Western" as having access to the Greeks, who discovered philosophy and science. Philosophy and science permit all human beings who know them to be self-critical. Only in the West does one find such a term as "ethnocentric," such a science as anthropology, or such a philosophy as relativism. Those who accuse the great books of being Western forget that their very accusation is Western. It's impossible for the great books really to reflect Western values, because Western values are in tension. Western philosophy and science are opposed to Western divine revelation, custom, tradition, to whatever resists reason.

One cannot become aware of Western values without realizing that they present a problem, rather than furnish a solution. What books are great is not decided by a local board of censors or by any government, but by common consent of the educated over generations and across national boundaries as to which books most memorably pose a human problem; for example, justice in Plato's *Republic*, love in Cervantes' *Don Quixote*.

So the authors of the great books are not agents of oppression. Authors who defend tyranny or lie for a cause soon lose their following when times change. Many of the great authors, it is true, were not revolutionaries. They were anxious to preserve the critical stance in all circumstances, and so they did not give their hearts to a political ideal, but offered their criticism in the soft voice of irony.

Indeed, the critics of the great books today are not revolutionaries either; they merely repeat the dominant values of our time, those of equal rights, which they often assert with the complacent outrage of a newspaper editorial. Such critics seem to risk nothing, neither life nor liberty nor career. In fact, of course, they risk everything. When small critics try to demean large ones, reason turns on itself and the principle of criticism is in danger. That principle is the only friend that equal rights have ever had.

I recently saw Spike Lee's movie "Do the Right Thing." It's a movie that is full of thought, I was surprised to see. It ends, as you know, with two quotations from dead

black males; one from Martin Luther King against violence, and one from Malcolm X in favor of violence. One character in the movie says, "You've always got to do the right thing." But what is the right thing? The movie ends with a question mark. And that, I think, is Western civilization at its best. I perhaps don't share all of Spike Lee's opinions, but he isn't politically correct, I'll hand him that.

PC at the universities is the suicide of the intellect. In the West now we find many intellectuals who take part against the intellect. If you want an example, look at Richard Rorty in the July 1, 1991 *New Republic*. Consider his philosophy of anti-foundationalism. There is no foundation to things discoverable by the intellect, and no foundation to the things that we believe, no reason to believe them; they're mere assertions. And being mere assertions, they're ultimately political assertions. Activating your intellect, using your bean, doesn't help. It doesn't change anything. The rational merely endorses the non-rational, so the university should merely endorse political views, the correct political views.

The Ivory Tower. Soon after I graduated from college, there was a commencement speaker at Harvard, a famous art historian whose name was Erwin Panofsky, who gave a speech on the ivory tower. Since he was an art historian, he was interested in the image, and the history of the image, of an ivory tower to represent a university. But he also gave a defense of the ivory tower. It signifies a certain moral superiority based on intellectual superiority, and therefore not open to the usual ills of moral superiority, namely self-righteousness and intrusiveness. (It's not that professors could do better at politics than politicians can; they can't. But politicians are looking not for truth, but for power. Professors are more naive than politicians, not out of ignorance, but because they're more knowing.) Now, however, the ivory tower no longer believes in the ivory tower, and you wouldn't hear that speech at a commencement these days. This development has a long history. It's a phenomenon known as "post-modern."

Once upon a time, in the Renaissance, philosophers formed the idea that the intellect would reform and spread civilization through an enlightenment of all mankind. The name for this came to be "modernity." It was a great project for the relief of man's estate, as one of the philosophers described it. Now Rousseau was the first modern philosopher to question that project, the first post-modern. Rousseau was represented in the figure of the noble savage. The noble savage is not civilized, obviously, but he's noble; or, rather, he's not civilized, and *therefore* he's noble. Rousseau represents modern Western civilization in criticism of itself.

Rousseau's noble savage could remind you of the multiculturalism today, which says that we in the West shouldn't be so proud of our mechanical, material civilization. It destroys nature, neglects human creativity. But there's this difference between the noble savage and multiculturalism: To be politically correct we dare not call our noble savage noble, and we dare not call him a savage. We can't call him a savage because all civilizations are equal. There's really no such thing as civilization, no such thing as being civilized; there are only cultures, and being in a culture is not the same thing as being cultivated. Cultures have replaced civilization. You cannot call the Third World uncivilized, but also, and for the same reason, you cannot call it noble. We want something noble, but we're so far from it as to be unable to pronounce the name.

But education *is* a noble thing. Every society has socialization, but only civilized society has education. Education is the intrepid questioning and self-criticism of reason: only the West has institutions of self-criticism. Those are our universities. All other cultures have self-expression only. You don't need a university to express yourself; you can do that with an army.

So, self-criticism is our uniqueness and our special nobility. I've been trying to show that the problem of politicization and PC goes very deep. It has to do with the rise and fall of modernity in Western politics and Western philosophy.

Our test now is, in part, intellectual – to understand our predicament. But, of course, it's also practical; it's to rally in defense of our universities. The universities have to take their help where they can get it, from Washington even, from the American people, who have more and better appreciation of education than our educators. And above all, we in the universities must stir ourselves; we must begin to oppose things we professors have allowed to happen at our universities without protest. We mustn't let things get by that we know are wrong; we must start to raise a little hell. We shouldn't despair, because the cause of the university is the highest there is. It's up to us to give it more power – the power to teach, the power to learn, and the power to question.