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the Assault On  
Individuality

*By Ward Parks*



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# Political Correctness and the Assault On Individuality

By Ward Parks

In the culture wars now raging on, around, and in relation to our university campuses, the leading weapon in the arsenal of the new radical establishment is the ad hominem attack. Critics of political correctness are routinely castigated for the racism, sexism, and homophobia that allegedly impels them; thus reasoned arguments are demolished not through reasoned rebuttal but through imputations of personal wickedness. Now a peculiarity of these accusations is that their moralism stands at odds with the relativism and even nihilism that academic radicals exhibit in other contexts. If all views and values are equal, what's wrong with racism in the first place? Yet radicals do indeed condemn racism, thus appealing to the moral sensibility of the American public at large that continues to believe that there is such a thing as right and wrong; yet at the same time they have been engaged in a programmatic undermining of traditional ethics and common sense. This strange collaboration between nihilism and moral puritanism, between the assertion that nothing is really good and true and the assertion that there are evils so absolute as to justify the sacrifice of a world of lesser goods to the task of combatting them, has been the key to success for academic radicals. It has enabled them to seem virtuous while maintaining commitment to no identifiable virtue. Yet academic radicals have a commitment nonetheless. They are committed to an ideology of power. The triumph of this ideology entails the demolition of the individual as the seat of conscience and moral authority. Thus the strategy of ad hominem attack is consistent with the greater aim of political correctness.

**The Strategy of Personal Attack.** Ad hominem attack takes many forms, and it will not be my task today to enumerate these, nor even to concentrate on the worse cases. If it were, I would be talking about the politicization of hiring and firing, the ideological exploitation of sexual harassment charges, and the reliance on guilt inducement and humiliation of scapegoats in sensitivity training sessions. But more subtle, and therefore more revealing, are the modes of personal attack that political correctors bring to bear on their most visible opponents. One such public figure is Lynne Cheney, whose most recent publication, "Telling the Truth," provided a moderate, balanced, and well-documented description of the state of political coerciveness that now holds sway in many academic arenas. Yet defenders of the academic establishment have replied that Cheney herself has been politicizing the National Endowment for the Humanities and, through the NEH, trying to politicize academe.

This is an astonishing criticism, emanating as it does from the mouths of the very people who for years have been proclaiming that all discourse is political and that the classroom ought therefore to be used by radical professors as a vehicle for social transformation. This was, indeed, the very kind of claim that Cheney had been quoting in "Telling the Truth." And yet—and here we come to the second leading countercharge—Cheney herself, or so allege her critics, has not been telling the truth. But apart from the fact that these critics do not deal with Cheney's evidence, their recourse to the idea of "truth" is itself surprising, since sophisticated academics of a poststructuralist stripe hold no truck with "truth" nor with any other such term that smacks of transcendence and disinterestedness. In short, the radical orthodoxy seems suddenly to have decided that politicization and prevarication are vices after all, and having thus reversed itself, has proceeded to indict Cheney ethically for what are really its own offenses.

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**Attacking Motivation.** The same tactic of substituting moral indictment of adversaries in place of reasoned rebuttal of claims has been evident in the response of the academic establishment not just to individuals like Cheney but to groups like the National Association of Scholars. The major NAS statements, "Is the Curriculum Biased" and "The Wrong Way to Reduce Campus Tensions," are, whether or not one agrees with them, principled responses to current academic conditions, and a number of the articles in *Academic Questions*, the NAS journal, present important evidence bearing on the political correctness controversy. But again, defenders of the new academic establishment do not respond to what NAS scholars actually say but to what allegedly motivates them. To Paul Bové, the NAS pretense that "some abstraction called 'free speech' has been violated" and its hypocritical defense of professional "decorum" merely serve to "mask violence"; such commitments induce "NAS types to support racist professors in their 'decorous' because 'scientific' assaults on nonwhite people."

Bové is referring, presumably, to Michael Levin and Philippe Rushdon; yet apart from the complexities of and differences between these two controversies, what is being brushed aside here is nothing less than the case for academic freedom. A scholar needs to be free to follow the logic of his argument wherever it leads because truth often violates against the conventional wisdom of a particular time and community; the examples of Socrates, Galileo, Darwin, and many others can be adduced on this point. One marvels that this argument needs to be made at all; yet Bové either cannot or will not differentiate between the defense of free inquiry and the defense of the unsavory conclusions which free inquiry sometimes brings to birth. Thus he does not hesitate to label the NAS membership "NAS'ies," implying an affinity between the organization and the Nazi movement. The sweeping reductionism in charges like this make reasoned discussion impossible. When an ideological professor can proceed to the moral indictment of a whole class of opponents without feeling obliged to make even a gesture towards acknowledging what they actually say, the cause of intellectual totalitarianism is far advanced.

**The Contradictions of Deconstruction.** Now the use of moral indictment in place of reasoned rebuttal makes a certain sense, as a rhetorical strategy anyway, in the context of a politicized discourse; but I feel it is noteworthy that this same device was much in evidence in literary studies ten or fifteen years ago when the ruling critical methods were not so overtly political but rather linguistic and philosophical. I became acquainted with this personally at the School of Criticism and Theory in 1981, when deconstruction was in its heyday. Those of us who resisted deconstruction were retrograde in a number of respects; "fascist," as I recall, was the epithet of choice, though subsequent disclosures about the early career of Paul de Man, the leading American deconstructionist, prompted his disciples thereafter to turn to other evils of ours.

Now it struck me at the time that there is something innately peculiar about a deconstructive moralism. For moral indictment makes no sense without moral agency; yet Derrida and his followers have been relentlessly warring against the idea of agency for a quarter of a century. The attack on the author is a special case of this. The belief that a text should be read as an expression of the intentions of the author, say the deconstructionists, is based on the fallacy that the author is a plenitude of meaning from which the text derives and that, further, he is able to control the play of signification in his text. But to the deconstructionist, the act is radically dissociated from the actor, and the actor himself has no real integrity, since the very limitations and circumscriptions that define him project those exclusions through which he can be deconstructed. This is to say that deconstruction holds no truck with the idea of identity. The human subject is himself a logocentric illusion. But if the individual does not exist, and if he is not the cause of his own actions, what could possibly be the sense of indicting him morally?

**Radical Relativism.** Further, even if the idea of the human individual could somehow be recuperated as a moral agent, it's hard to see how deconstructionists could affirm any moral principle that could serve as a basis for moral judgment. For it is to deconstruction, more than to any other thread in the current web of political correctness, that the charge of "radical relativism" best applies. Deconstructive relativism is actually a kind of radical negationalism whose logic runs like this. Any assertion defines itself through an act of exclusion, and that exclusion projects a supplement. That supplement is both the antithesis of the assertion and its co-condition. The idea of "man," for example, defines itself by casting "woman" out from its nature, and in this way "man" becomes dependent on the "woman" who has been excluded.

**Left-Wing Moral Puritanism.** Now while deconstructionists would never use a term like "ethical imperative," it remains true that the ethical imperative governing their critical practice is that what is marginalized ought to be brought back into the center. That is how deconstruction proceeds: it identifies what a literary text, for example, has excluded, and then it shows how this excluded content is actually central to the project of this literary text. Such an imperative is indifferent to the moral content of what is in that center and what is in the margins. Deconstructionists have tried to cast their theory in a favorable light by representing as marginalized what is also in their perception victimized; thus a politicized deconstructive reading would identify as marginalized contents that are in some way associated with women or minorities. But nothing in the logic of deconstruction itself would stand in the way of the very accurate perception that Klansmen and Nazi sympathizers are exceedingly marginalized in the typical literature department today and that a proper deconstructive reading of the sociological "text" of such a department ought to mainstream them. My point is that deconstruction is innately amoral and cannot serve as the basis for moral judgment without serious contradiction. Of course, no one here will be surprised to learn that political correctors contradict themselves. My question is, why did deconstruction arise in the same intellectual environment that gave birth to left-wing moral puritanism, and through what mechanism have the two been able to function so complicitously?

My construction of what has happened grows out of my belief that human nature has an inborn and irrepressible moral component; no matter how badly people are actually behaving, they cannot keep from orienting themselves, whether positively or negatively, towards some conception of the good. Even criminals do this; street gangs, for example, have codes of loyalty and vengeance not unlike those of warlike tribal societies.

**The Assault on the Individual.** It is precisely through controlling the moral function that our political correctors have attained their current position of ascendancy, both in the universities and in the nation at large; and we need to understand the mechanism that has been involved. What deconstruction provided was a method for systematically embarrassing traditionalists whenever they tried to affirm and build judgments on the basis of ordinary and sane ethical principles. But this suppression of the normal operation of the ethical function created a vacuum which the morality of the radical Left could fill. Deconstructive and politically leftist rhetorical and logical moves continue to operate in this mutually supportive relationship: deconstruction levels and keeps the space open, and political radicalism fills the space with its new idols. But the change cannot be described simply as the substitution of one set of moral principles or value terms for another. In the process the individual has been eradicated, at least in a certain sense. No longer is moral assertion conceived as an appeal to the individual conscience. Rather, morality has been collectivized, and the role of the individual is to offer his assent. The good individual is he who has accepted that good which the collective has decreed, not he who has found good within his own heart.

This is ethics reconstituted within an ideology of centralization and power, since it demands that individuals surrender their own judgment of what is right and wrong and put determination of ends in the hands of those who define the ruling moral paradigms. Now deconstruction is fundamentally



an instrument for destabilization and decentering, so at this stage its usefulness becomes more limited. Thus it is that, over the past few years, deconstructionists have yielded center stage to a new assortment of critics and critical methods. Perhaps the most important of these has been Michel Foucault, whose peculiar talent lay in the bleak gaze which he turned to social and institutional history, a gaze in which all nuances and intimacies and reciprocities of human interchange were reduced to power relations. This work was continued and extended in literary studies by a group called the new historicists, who are essentially soft Marxists uninterested in economics but addressing themselves instead to a history of cultural production. At the same time, hard Marxists such as Fredric Jameson were reestablishing coherence amid the chaos that deconstruction had wrought.

**Marxist Theory.** With Jameson and company a historical dialectic becomes the agent and mover, and human subjectivity and consciousness are seen as epiphenomenal, shaped rather than shaping, moving within limits always circumscribed by forces that they never fully grasp. Structures of will and intention unfold in spaces defined now by the political unconscious. Conventional ethics, in such a view, is essentially trivial; what matters are history's grand designs, which individual actors, embroiled in their own petty dramas, can rarely discern. Marxist professors, however, seem to be miraculously free from the limitations that bedevil the rest of us with respect to the historical and political determination of our consciousness; and so they are the ones who will define for us what our roles should be in the new world order that is revealing itself, naturally, as described in their theories.

**Political Sins.** Again, it is not the usual practice of Marxists, new historicists, and other fellow travellers to speak of ethics as such; yet movements of condemnation and proscription perform a crucial function within their work. The ethical operator within the essentially neo-Marxist program that is political correctness is the idea of oppression. By accentuating oppression, political correctors appeal to the moral sensibilities of the general public, since most of us would agree that genuine oppression is much to be deplored. But neo-Marxist oppression, as we have seen, is not located within the structure of intention and subjectivity, but within the political unconscious. We can, and routinely do, perpetrate oppression without knowing it. Thus we stand in need of perpetual consciousness-raising, chastisement, and confession. This is the format of the contemporary sensitivity training session. The demand that young people apologize for sins that they are unaware of ever having committed profoundly undermines the confidence they might otherwise develop in the voice of their own conscience. Yet political correctors cannot permit individuals to learn to rely on their own inner sense of truth, since the dogmas of political correctness are thoroughly counterintuitive. Therefore the sin of oppression, inaccessible to individual self-awareness yet the source of individual guilt, becomes the club with which they break the back of the human spirit.

“Oppression” is by nature a political sin, since it occurs between people in the context of power relations. A moral system that is oriented around “oppression” as its defining evil does not will the moral or spiritual upliftment of individuals as its final end; rather, individual transformation is instrumental towards ulterior political purposes. Traditional ethics too registers concern for community well-being; thus it encodes such needful social virtues as respect for legitimate authority and sacrifice for others. Yet the underlying goal of traditional ethical culture—and here I am attending particularly to the religious sphere that has been the source of our most enduring ethical systems—is higher self-knowledge and an approach to the divine. Salvation remains an individual affair, whether one is a Christian, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist. By the same token, the root “sins” in traditional moral culture are flaws of character, not political infelicities. In the Christian Middle Ages, for example, the seven deadly sins (pride, greed, envy, etc.) are aspects of that selfishness which block the outpouring of the grace of God into the heart of the individual man or woman. The dignity of individuals is inscribed in such a conception, for it is through individual sanctification that the highest good is made known in human life. Such a process demands too the cultivation of con-

science, since conscience is the arbiter within the arena of the individual human soul. By contrast, a politicized conception of sin demands a locus of judgment in the political sphere, where the free exercise of conscience is liable to be stifled amid the charges and countercharges that get bandied about when power is at stake.

**Race-Class-Gender.** Oppression as unconscious political sin requires a sociological model that can assign guilt to large classes of people without providing these people with a way of knowing what in personal terms they are guilty of. It is here that the race-class-gender trinity becomes a useful tool in the neo-Marxist project of tearing part traditional community and reconstituting it on ideological foundations. American society has come to believe that no person should be discriminated against on basis of race and gender; at the same time, race and gender are sites of intense social conflict. By magnifying and inflating these conflicts, radicals can contribute to the atomizing of our society. Racial conflict promotes tribal loyalty at the expense of law and so weakens the national covenant; conflict between the sexes slices the tissue of human intimacy and asserts the priority of the political over the natural. Once society has been atomized and the traditional bonds that tied people together have been sufficiently weakened, then the assault on the individual is particularly devastating, since the individual person is without effective support. When he is now accused of a racism and sexism that resides in a socio-political analysis of the world at large to which his personal behavior is irrelevant, he is being pressured to give up the right to assess the world and himself in terms of the moral content that he himself finds there. What political correctors want of individuals, in other words, is ideological and moral surrender.

Race, class, and gender provide the major instruments in the assault; but other kinds of grouping provide natural sites of resistance to political correctness and so have been the targets of unremitting denunciation. My emphasis on the individual in this talk should not be taken as a denial of the human need to form associations; to the contrary, individuals fulfill themselves in large part through the ties that bind them. Left to their own devices, people naturally affiliate with groups of different types. Race, class, and gender are indeed variables relevant to group formation; but they are not the only such variables. Three other group principles are family (or more generally, kinship), nation, and religion. A sociological analysis concerned with group identity ought to attend to all of these categories; but it is race, class, and gender that the academic Left harps on. For family and religion constitute themselves on grounds that are not originally political at all, whereas the particular nation in which we live—the United States—is founded on universal principles that the radical Left is trying to undermine. This antipathy is not new; socialists and revolutionaries have been waging war on family, nation, and religion for more than a hundred years, and the sad condition of these institutions is in part reflective of the battering they have had to take.

**Resisting Totalitarians.** The hostility towards family and religion is particularly interesting; for while these two institutions are oriented towards opposite ends of the human experience, in traditional societies they have consistently been friendly to each other. For family is constituted through ties of blood and engages that aspect of our humanity which is most incarnated in the world of materiality. Sexual relations between man and woman and the nursing which a mother gives to her infant are probably the most intimate of shared human experiences in the physical sense. On the other hand, communion with God, or whatever other names are given to states of spiritual exaltation in the various religious traditions, satisfies that urge in the human spirit to rise above the materiality of its form and circumstances and to attain to that which is supreme. The alliance between family and religion poses a formidable obstacle to ideologues who wish not merely to govern the state but to possess the human soul. I am speaking, of course, of totalitarians, for that is what our political correctors are. Deconstruction, Marxism, and feminism are all relentlessly anti-transcendental, and thus strike at what is central to religious experience; at the same time, the politically correct alliance is

waging open war against the traditional heterosexual family. We have seen this phenomenon before. Communist governments throughout this century have engaged in the same basic campaign.

**An Ideology Against Humanity.** Political correctness has enjoyed its success because it has managed to convince the public that it speaks on behalf of virtue. My purpose has been to analyze the mechanism by which conscience has been snared and the power of the moral function coopted for radical purposes. In truth, there is nothing virtuous about political correctness. It is an ideology of power, or a kind of failed religion; it appeals to human aspiration, but turns the force of idealism destructively against human ordinariness, instead of learning to discover the wisdom and greatness that is to be found in simple things. The human spirit cannot permanently be kept captive to creeds of this type. There is a dignity within humanity that always reasserts itself, whatever depravity men may descend to for spans of time. We should not forget this. Truth retains its power, and the human conscience its inextinguishable spark. Political ideologues who think that they can rewrite reality and the human character doom themselves not only to eventual defeat, but to ignominy as well.

I am reminded, in closing, of J.R.R. Tolkien's great saga, *The Lord of the Rings*, where the power of Sauron is overthrown not by mighty warriors but by simple hobbits who have no pretensions about themselves and prefer a smoke and a good meal to glory and dominion. Now is a time for a heroism of ordinariness, for small acts rightly performed even though they seem in the short run to be unavailing. I am sure that in the end these efforts will not be in vain.

