



# **THE MYTH OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS**



THE  
CONSERVATIVE  
ATTACK  
ON  
HIGHER  
EDUCATION

**JOHN K. WILSON**

## The Myth of Political Correctness



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CONSERVATIVE



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To all my teachers



## ► Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Preface: PC and Me xi

► 1 The Myth of Political Correctness 1

► 2 Conservative Correctness 31

► 3 The Cult of Western Culture 64

► 4 The Myth of Speech Codes 90

► 5 The Myth of Sexual Correctness 109

► 6 The Myth of Reverse Discrimination 136

Conclusion: Beyond Political Correctness 158

Notes 165

Index 197





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I hope that *The Myth of Political Correctness* will provoke further arguments and discussions about these issues. I encourage readers with questions or comments to contact me on email ([jkw3@midway.uchicago.edu](mailto:jkw3@midway.uchicago.edu)) or at Teachers for a Democratic Culture (P.O. Box 6405, Evanston, IL 60204).

## ► Preface: PC and Me

When I began to hear about political correctness as a senior at the University of Illinois in 1990, I wondered what I was missing. Where were the radical students intimidating other students and teachers? Where were the tenured radicals indoctrinating me with leftist propaganda? Where *was* political correctness?

I had encountered leftist professors and students, of course, but I had never thought of them as the “thought police” that *Newsweek* told me were invading college campuses. Most of the leftists I met seemed like nice people, polite and tolerant of other people’s views. And the conservative students and professors I’d encountered didn’t seem like victims of a new McCarthyism. They had their own monthly newspaper funded by conservative foundations, their own organizations, and their own campus lectures. I don’t recall hearing anyone called “racist” or “sexist” or “homophobic,” and I certainly never heard anyone (except perhaps the conservatives) use the phrase *politically correct*. I didn’t hear many students challenging the “liberal orthodoxy,” but then not many of us challenged any orthodoxies. We sat in class and listened to the teachers and read the assignments and wrote the papers and took the tests.

I went to college as the culture wars erupted in 1987, back when “PC” referred only to computers. But in my first week at the University of Illinois, my philosophy professor assigned America’s hottest best-seller, Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind*, which begins: “There is one thing a professor can be absolutely certain of: almost every student entering the university believes, or says he believes, that truth is relative.”<sup>1</sup> This assertion surprised me because I’d never heard anyone say that *all* truth is relative. After all, one of the complaints about politically correct people would be that they believed they knew the truth and intimidated those who disagreed with them. In my classes

and my discussions with friends, I constantly heard arguments about what was true and what was false. Perhaps what Bloom mistook for relativism was the politeness and tolerance of these arguments. Unlike the 1960s, the campuses of the 1990s are not fiercely divided by passionate debates about war and justice, and students are less likely to hold extreme views, or to occupy campus buildings to express them. But this wasn't relativism; often it was just uncertainty and a healthy skepticism about any dogma. While Bloom's outrageous statements intrigued me, I found it difficult to believe that he really knew what was going on at most colleges.

Unlike most of the people attacking political correctness and higher education, I am a firsthand witness to what has been happening on college campuses for the past eight years. As a student I've taken more than 150 classes from dozens of departments, ranging from economics to philosophy to women's studies, including the first courses on gay and lesbian history ever offered at my institutions. I had both leftist and conservative professors, and I read a broad range of books from the trendy to the traditional. If anyone could judge whether there was such a thing as political correctness, surely I could. I also read a lot of books on my own, especially books about the danger of "tenured radicals" on college campuses. But there were disturbing discrepancies between what I was reading about pc and the reality in front of my eyes.

I read that everything was being "deconstructed" and that the Great Books were being discarded in favor of books by foreigners with strange names like Derrida, Lacan, Barthes, and Foucault. I read that under the guise of multiculturalism, leftist propaganda was dominating the curriculum. But the book I was assigned most often in college was Plato's *Republic*. I read it in five classes as an undergraduate at the University of Illinois and an equal number of times as a graduate student at the University of Chicago. While I took some unusual classes with progressive teachers and read some things that will never appear on a list of great books, it was almost entirely through my own efforts to find something different. If I did what thousands of other students had done and took only the standard required classes, I would have encountered very little of the multiculturalism that is supposedly taking over higher education.

Shortly after I graduated, the conservative newspaper on campus printed a front-page article claiming that leftist English professors were trying to ban Shakespeare (along with Columbus, John Locke, Adam Smith, John Calvin, and Clarence Thomas). Ban Shakespeare? I wondered. That sounded like the pc thought police.

"Who's trying to ban Shakespeare?" asked an English professor at the booth promoting the newspaper.

"Lots of English professors," answered the woman there.

"Who?"

"Professor Cary Nelson. He hasn't had a lot of nice things to say about Shakespeare."<sup>2</sup>

The conservative newspaper had reported that Nelson's mission "is to forever annihilate the traditional literary canon."<sup>3</sup> In response, Nelson wrote in the campus paper: "I have worked to open up the curriculum to more women and minorities, but I have also published on Shakespeare, and like all my colleagues, I support the department's requirement that all English majors take a Shakespeare course. I have never met an English professor anywhere on the planet who wanted to remove Shakespeare from the curriculum."<sup>4</sup>

When I looked at the English Department's reading lists, I found a dozen classes devoted solely to Shakespeare, and many more that read his plays. No Derrida, no Lacan, no Barthes, no Foucault showed up in the courses. The PC thought police who won't say "a lot of nice things" about Shakespeare suddenly didn't seem quite so ominous.

"Are you politically correct?" asked the cover of *New York* magazine. Readers were told to test themselves: "Do I say 'Indian' instead of 'Native American'? 'Pet' instead of 'Animal Companion'?"<sup>5</sup> I had to confess that sometimes I said "Native American," mostly to avoid confusion with the Indians in south Asia. I didn't know that saying a word could make me a fellow traveler with the thought police. But the "Animal Companion" part puzzled me. By this definition, I wasn't politically correct; in fact, by this definition I'd never met anyone who was politically correct. Do people really say "animal companion" instead of "pet"? Does anyone accuse those who use the word *pet* of being a "speciesist"? Would anyone take them seriously if they did? I began to suspect that the "political correctness" movement was no more than the product of someone's paranoid imagination. Being asked "Are you politically correct?" is like being asked "Are you in favor of the international conspiracy of Jewish bankers who control the world?" Of course I'm opposed to an international conspiracy of Jewish bankers controlling the world, but I also know that no such conspiracy exists.

One of the charges I often came across in my reading was that affirmative action denies fair treatment to white males. A professor in my undergraduate political science department (whose faculty is mostly white males) wrote that white male Ph.D.s "probably never will get an academic job interview, let alone a job offer."<sup>6</sup> As a future white male Ph.D., this obviously concerned me. Even though I supported affirmative action, I was a little leery about accomplishing the goal of diversity by making myself unemployed.

But when I thought about my own experiences, I wondered who was really

receiving these preferences. After receiving a top-notch education in high school, I went to one of the best public universities in the country, with two scholarships to pay my way and the privilege of being admitted to an excellent honors program. Then I was accepted by one of the best graduate schools in the country, offered a prestigious fellowship, and given a federal government fellowship that will pay me \$40,000 over four years to get a free education. How many minorities ever get privileges like that?

I certainly don't see lots of minorities being given these special benefits. It's hard to see many minorities at all. At the University of Chicago (where I'm a graduate student), less than 2 percent of the faculty are black and white males are regularly hired. Only 3 percent of the graduate students and 4 percent of the undergraduates are black. Hispanics are less than 2 percent of the faculty, 4 percent of the graduate students, and 4 percent of the undergraduates. Is this the "victim's revolution" that is going to ruin my future career as a professor?

But "racial preferences" weren't the only threat to white males mentioned in these conservative critiques. I often read about the evils of feminism. I heard that women's studies classes had been taken over by radical feminists who were silencing dissenters, attacking men, and indoctrinating their students. But my own experience belies these charges of intimidation.

I took several women's studies classes, still searching for these man-hating feminists who are supposedly politicizing education and intimidating students. But all I found were classrooms full of discussions, not politically correct sermons. And I never encountered any classes in other departments that had such a dramatic impact on the lives of the students. I suppose some "politically incorrect" topics were off-limits—we never had a debate about the equality of women—but I saw far more openness there than in most of the other courses I took.

I remember economics classes where the students never argued about economics but instead answered test questions and homework assignments according to the assumptions of a free-market model that even the teachers admitted was inaccurate. I also took large lecture classes in many departments where hundreds of students copied down identical notes (or purchased them from professional note takers) in preparation for the upcoming multiple-choice test. I finished one fill-in-the-ovals final exam in fifteen minutes while proctors patrolled the lecture hall and checked IDs. Curiously, no one called this "indoctrination," even though it was far more oppressive to me than any women's studies class I took.

I never saw a conservative student silenced or insulted or punished in any class for expressing politically incorrect ideas. As a columnist for the student

newspaper, I never heard of any conservative being prevented from expressing controversial views by the supposedly ubiquitous “speech codes.” The idea that leftist students and faculty dominate American colleges and universities seemed like a joke in view of the general apathy on campus.

The most student activism I ever saw came during the Persian Gulf War in 1991, when students marched in protest against (and some in support of) the war. Perhaps the funniest moment occurred during a small antiwar rally held in a park across the street from a fraternity. Some fraternity members tried to drown out the speeches by playing music on their stereos full blast. To my amusement, the songs they played were Bruce Springsteen’s “Born in the USA” and Jimi Hendrix’s Woodstock rendition of “The Star-Spangled Banner”—these two antiwar songs were the most patriotic music they could find on their CD racks. But strangely, trying to silence an antiwar rally didn’t count as political correctness.

As I began to examine the stories about political correctness, I noticed a curious double standard. Whenever conservatives were criticized or a leftist expressed some extreme idea, the story quickly became another anecdote of political correctness. But when someone on the Left was censored—often with the approval of the same conservatives who complained about the PC police—nobody called it political correctness, and stories of this right-wing intolerance were never mentioned in articles and books on PC totalitarianism. My own experience made me question the existence of the “PC fascism” I had read about. And as I began to study the terrifying tales of leftist McCarthyism, I found that the truth was often the reverse of what the media reported. While some stories about PC are true and deplorable, the scale of censorship is nowhere near what most people think.

What startles me most about the PC scare is that the critics are so uninterested in what is really happening on college campuses. The anecdotes have become more important than the reality. By force of repetition, these anecdotes have been woven into the tale of a “victim’s revolution” on campus. When closely examined, however, these anecdotes unravel under the strain of exaggeration, deceptive omission of key facts, and occasional outright invention. What matters to critics is not the truth but the story—the myth of political correctness. Every PC anecdote retells this myth by ritualistic invocation of the image of leftist thought police. The myth of political correctness is a powerful conspiracy theory created by conservatives and the media who have manipulated resentment against leftist radicals into a backlash against the fictional monster of political correctness.





## The Myth of Political Correctness



## ► 1 The Myth of Political Correctness

In 1991, a new phrase began to be heard across America. *Political correctness*, PC for short, quickly became one of the hottest terms in the country, spawning a flood of books, magazine articles, and editorials describing a reign of terror at American universities, led by radical students and faculty and supported by acquiescent administrators. Within the span of a few months, the media produced a barrage of articles, each a variation on a single theme: that leftist totalitarians had taken control of universities and were intimidating professors, censoring conservatives, politicizing curricula, and imposing a new “McCarthyism of the Left” on higher education.

“Political correctness” became the rallying cry of the conservative critics of academia, the phrase behind which all of their enemies—multiculturalism, affirmative action, speech codes, feminism, and tenured radicals—could be united into a single conspiracy. The mythology of political correctness declares that conservatives are the victims of a prevailing leftist ideology in American universities, oppressed by radical students and faculty determined to brainwash them. But the conservative attacks on these politically correct “thought police” have distorted the truth about what goes on in colleges and universities. Instead of condemning the excesses of a few extremists and abuses of due process by administrators, critics have declared that the mere presence of radical ideas has corrupted the entire system of higher education. Instead of telling the truth, the forces against political correctness have used exaggeration and distortion to create the mythology of PC, a myth that bears little resemblance to what is really happening on college campuses.

Conservatives manufactured the political correctness crisis and skillfully pushed it into the national spotlight. This does not mean that all examples of political correctness are pure invention; leftists do sometimes show intol-

erance toward those who fail to toe the party line. But leftist intimidation in universities has always paled in comparison with the far more common repression by the conservative forces who control the budgets and run colleges and universities.

My claim is not that American universities are perfect defenders of free expression, or that political correctness is pure invention with no basis in reality. When I describe political correctness as a myth, I do not mean that everything about it is false or every anecdote is fraudulent. Walter Lippmann once noted that “the distinguishing mark of a myth is that truth and error, fact and fable, report and fantasy, are all on the same plane of credibility.”<sup>1</sup> Without doubt many students and faculty have been wrongly punished for their views. And there are some leftists who would not hesitate, if given the power, to oppress conservatives. But generally they do not have the power, and few have the inclination to create their own ideological monarchies. The greater power is held by the status quo, which often enforces conservative doctrines without ever gaining the publicity devoted to leftist pc.

The myth of political correctness has created the illusion of a conspiracy of leftists who have taken over higher education and twisted it to serve their political purposes. Attacks on political correctness have misled the public and unfairly maligned a large number of faculty and students. Worse yet, the crusade against pc has silenced the deeper questions about quality and equality that our colleges and universities must face, and a greatly needed debate has been shut down by the false reports and misleading attacks on higher education. The myth of political correctness has made every radical idea, no matter how trivial or harmless, seem like the coming of an apocalypse for higher education, complete with four new horsepeople—Speech Codes, Multiculturalism, Sexual Correctness, and Affirmative Action.

The conservative backlash against universities has been funded by right-wing foundations and supported by liberals and journalists who dislike the academic Left. Using a long list of inaccurate anecdotes, endlessly recycled in conservative and mainstream publications, the right-wingers have distorted and manipulated the debates about higher education. Presenting conservative white males as the true victims of oppression on campus, they have convinced the public that radicals are now the ones who threaten civil liberties. This is the myth of political correctness that conservatives have created and successfully marketed to the media and the general public.

Not only are most of the anecdotes purporting to prove political correctness badly distorted by conservative propaganda, but the litany of scattered examples fails to demonstrate the critics’ central claim: that these stories are not isolated incidents but a national pattern of repression under the control

of a secret cabal of leftist professors. These conspirators are called by many names—the thought police, the PC totalitarians, the new McCarthyists, and tenured radicals—but the threat is always the same: conservatives silenced, Western culture trashed, academic standards discarded, and classes turned over to politicized teaching and ethnic cheerleading.

The refusal of conservatives to see anything but a conspiracy of malicious leftists in recent efforts to broaden the college curriculum has created the very atmosphere of intellectual intimidation that critics blame on the Left. Although the attacks on political correctness have helped to stimulate some debates about higher education, they have mostly silenced discussion. Critics frequently make no effort to argue about the ideas they deride, and opposing views are mocked rather than refuted—with “PC” itself being an unanswerable form of ridicule. By criticizing anyone who dares to discuss race, class, and gender, by attacking all multiculturalism as political indoctrination, by misrepresenting the facts about the PC controversy, and by failing to consider the arguments of the other side, the conservatives and the media distorted what might have been (and what still can be) a productive debate about our universities.

The myth of political correctness has become accepted as gospel when describing the state of American universities. But the myth did not appear out of nowhere. It is the product of a conservative movement that undermined higher education throughout the Reagan-Bush years, honing its skills and funding the attacks that led to the PC bashing. The story of how “political correctness” began, and how conservatives used the myth of political correctness to appeal to liberals and journalists, reveals how little of the truth has really been told.

### *The Origins of Political Correctness*

In only a few years, the term *political correctness* has grown from obscurity to national prominence. The words first appeared two centuries ago in the 1793 Supreme Court case *Chisholm v. Georgia*, which upheld the right of a citizen to sue another state. Justice James Wilson wrote an opinion in which he objected to the wording of a common toast: “‘The United States’ instead of the ‘People of the United States’ is the toast given. This is not politically correct.”<sup>2</sup> Wilson’s use of the term was quite literal. He felt that the people, not the states, held the true authority of the United States, and therefore a toast to the states violated the “correct” political theory. Supporters of states’ rights did not concur, and the Eleventh Amendment was passed to overturn the *Chisholm* decision. And the phrase *politically correct* quickly faded from memory.

Although no one is sure when or where *politically correct* was revived, nearly

everyone agrees that it was used sarcastically among leftists to criticize themselves for taking radical doctrines to absurd extremes. Roger Geiger notes that political correctness was “a sarcastic reference to adherence to the party line by American communists in the 1930s.”<sup>3</sup> Herbert Kohl “first heard the phrase ‘politically correct’ in the late 1940s in reference to political debates between socialists and members of the United States Communist Party,” where “politically correct” was “being used disparagingly to refer to someone whose loyalty to the CP line overrode compassion and led to bad politics.”<sup>4</sup> Ruth Perry traces PC to the late 1960s and the Black Power movement, perhaps inspired by Mao Tse-tung’s frequent reference to “correct” ideas. “Politically correct” was used not by extremists on the left to describe their enemies but by more moderate liberals who objected to the intolerance of some leftists. Perry says that “the phrase politically correct has always been double-edged” and “has long been our own term of self-criticism.”<sup>5</sup>

During the 1980s, conservatives began to take over this leftist phrase and exploit it for political gain, expanding its meaning to include anyone who expressed radical sentiments. Conservative writer Robert Kelner first heard of “political correctness” in the fall of 1985 as “a bit of college slang bandied about by young conservatives.”<sup>6</sup> And the conservatives not only appropriated *politically correct* for their own attacks on the radical Left, they also transformed it into a new phrase—*political correctness*.

The liberals’ original “I’m not politically correct” was an ironic defense against those who took extremism to new extremes, who demanded absolute consistency to radical principles. The conservatives warped this meaning to convey the image of a vast conspiracy controlling American colleges and universities. *Politically correct* referred to the views of a few extreme individuals; *political correctness* described a broad movement that had corrupted the entire system of higher education. By this transformation the conservatives accused universities of falling under the influence of extremist elements. For conservatives, “I’m not politically correct” became a badge of honor, a defense against a feared attack—even though no one had been seriously accused of being politically incorrect.

*Politically incorrect* is now used as a marketing device. The Madison Center for Educational Affairs recently published *The Common Sense Guide to American Colleges*, with “politically incorrect” proudly emblazoned on the top right-hand corner; Berke Breathed’s collection of cartoons is titled *Politically, Fashionably, and Aerodynamically Incorrect*; and Rush Limbaugh’s newsletter is advertised as an “absolutely politically incorrect publication.”<sup>7</sup> A *National Review* book is titled *The Politically Incorrect Reference Guide*. A company adver-