

BAD THEORY

PC problems go beyond censorship

The departure of UT English professor Alan Gribben (to Auburn, of all places) for his opposition to the proposed changes in English 306 represents, in grandiose terms, the story of one martyr standing up to the onslaught of political correctness. Stanley Fish, professor of English at Duke, and other defenders of PC have spent the last few months on *Nightline* and *McNeil/Lehrer* arguing that PC censorship, if it exists, is justified to accommodate an increasingly ethnic society. This camp holds that opposition to the politicization of academia, multiculturalism and the deconstruction of Western culture amounts to typical status-quo whining.

At first, the PC debate was clearly delineated by strident terms — a *Newsweek* cover story last winter called PC academics “Thought Police.” But the debate has made little progress, because professors defending this hybrid form of censorship have refused to acknowledge any abuse of their authority. This self-serving denial shifts the focus away from the most important question: whether censorship is sometimes justified for sensitivity’s sake.

Now, in the face of undeniable evidence that wild-eyed professors actively promote pet agendas in class, the American Association of University Professors gives a sly rebuttal. The accused PC perpetrators conveniently deny that the censorship poses serious problems and downgrade the importance of cases in which professors were shouted down in class or censured by administrations for politically incorrect remarks.

They go one better by claiming that press coverage of the “non-existent censorship” implicitly amounts to the conspiratorial media doing conservatives’ bidding. For disciplines (Marxism, feminism and some minority studies) whose very existence is justified only on the thesis that the “establishment” is oppressing them, media criticism is only to be expected from a corrupt system.

It’s important not to be distracted by superficial questions like whether PC *really* exists or not. It does. The primary task should be to delve into the actual theories producing the furor, not simply the censorship they entail. Christina Sommers of Clark University took this proper approach last Friday at the SAVE-sponsored lecture.

These theories’ greatest danger to free speech is that they, as a matter of principle, define the world in terms of one group exploiting and victimizing the other. The bedrock principles for these disciplines are not learning for its own sake. Instead, their *raison d’être* is the premise that the path to a just society would become clear to all if they could only convince the rest of the depraved world that their oppression/exploitation/imperialist theory is true. This is the reason that the defenders of PC prefer hiding behind innocuous terms like “openness” and “expanding ethnicity,” rather than vigorous debate on the soundness of their theories.

—Curt Besselman