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Academia's Fashionable Orthodoxy

The Rising Hegemony of the Politically Correct

By **RICHARD BERNSTEIN**

INSTEAD of writing about literary classics and other topics, as they have in the past, freshmen at the University of Texas next fall will base their compositions on a packet of essays on discrimination, affirmative-action and civil-rights cases. The new program, called "Writing on Difference," was voted in by the faculty last month and has been praised by many professors for giving the curriculum more relevance to real-life concerns. But some see it as a stinging example of academic orthodoxy.

"You cannot tell me that students will not be inevitably graded on politically correct thinking in these classes," Alan Gribben, a professor of English, said at the time the change was being discussed.

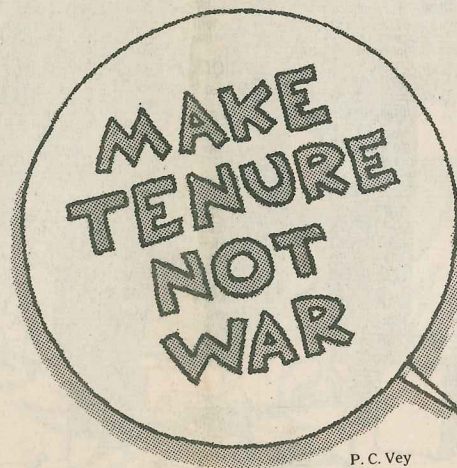
The term "politically correct," with its suggestion of Stalinist orthodoxy, is spoken more with irony and disapproval than with reverence. But across the country the term

p.c., as it is commonly abbreviated, is being heard more and more in debates over what should be taught at the universities. There are even initials — p.c.p. — to designate a politically correct person. And though the terms are not used in utter seriousness, even by the p.c.p.'s themselves, there is a large body of belief in academia and elsewhere that a cluster of opinions about race, ecology, feminism, culture and foreign policy defines a kind of "correct" attitude toward the problems of the world, a sort of unofficial ideology of the university.

Pressure to Conform

Last weekend, a meeting of the Western Humanities Conference in Berkeley, Calif., was called " 'Political Correctness' and Cultural Studies," and it examined what effect the pressure to conform to currently fashionable ideas is having on scholarship.

Central to p.c.-ness, which has roots in 1960's radicalism, is the view that Western



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society has for centuries been dominated by what is often called "the white male power structure" or "patriarchal hegemony." A related belief is that everybody but white

heterosexual males has suffered some form of repression and been denied a cultural voice or been prevented from celebrating what is commonly called "otherness."

"We, the non-Western-Europeans, have no greatness, no culture, no explanations, no beauty, perhaps no humanity," said Amanda Kemp, a student at Stanford University who was active in the campaign three years ago to eliminate a required course in Western civilization. The view that Western civilization is inherently unfair to minorities, women and homosexuals has been at the center of politically correct thinking on campuses ever since the recent debate over university curriculums began.

Affirmative action is politically correct. So too are women's studies, gay and lesbian studies, and African-American studies, all of which are strongly represented in the scholarly panels at such professional meetings as those of the American Historical Association

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and the Modern Language Association. Politically correct papers include "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl," "Brotherly Love: Nabokov's Homosexual Double" and "A Womb of His Own: Male Renaissance Poets in the Female Body," which were on the program for the M.L.A. conference last year in Washington.

The cluster of politically correct ideas includes a powerful environmentalism and, in foreign policy, support for Palestinian self-determination and sympathy for third world revolutionaries, particularly those in Central America. Biodegradable garbage bags get the p.c. seal of approval. Exxon does not.

But more than an earnest expression of belief, "politically correct" has become a sarcastic jibe used by those, conservatives and classical liberals alike, to describe what they see as a growing intolerance, a closing of debate, a pressure to conform to a radical program or risk being accused of a commonly reiterated trio of thought crimes: sexism, racism and homophobia.

"It's a manifestation of what some are calling liberal fascism," said Roger Kimball, the author of "Tenured Radicals," a critique of what he calls the politicization of the humanities. "Under the name of pluralism and freedom of speech, it is an attempt to enforce a narrow and ideologically motivated view of both the curriculum and what it means to be an educated person, a responsible citizen."

Certain subjects, such as affirmative action and homosexuality, have been removed from civil debate, Mr. Kimball says, so strong is the force to accept the politically correct view. More accurately, perhaps, the figures on campuses opposed to affirmative action, for example, are regarded as radicals of the right.

Some of the intolerance of the p.c. point of view comes from conservatives like Mr. Kimball and Allan Bloom, the author of "The Closing of the American Mind," who complain that there is a hidden radical agenda in university curriculums. The p.c.p.'s respond that they are reacting to an orthodoxy set in place by the traditionalists.

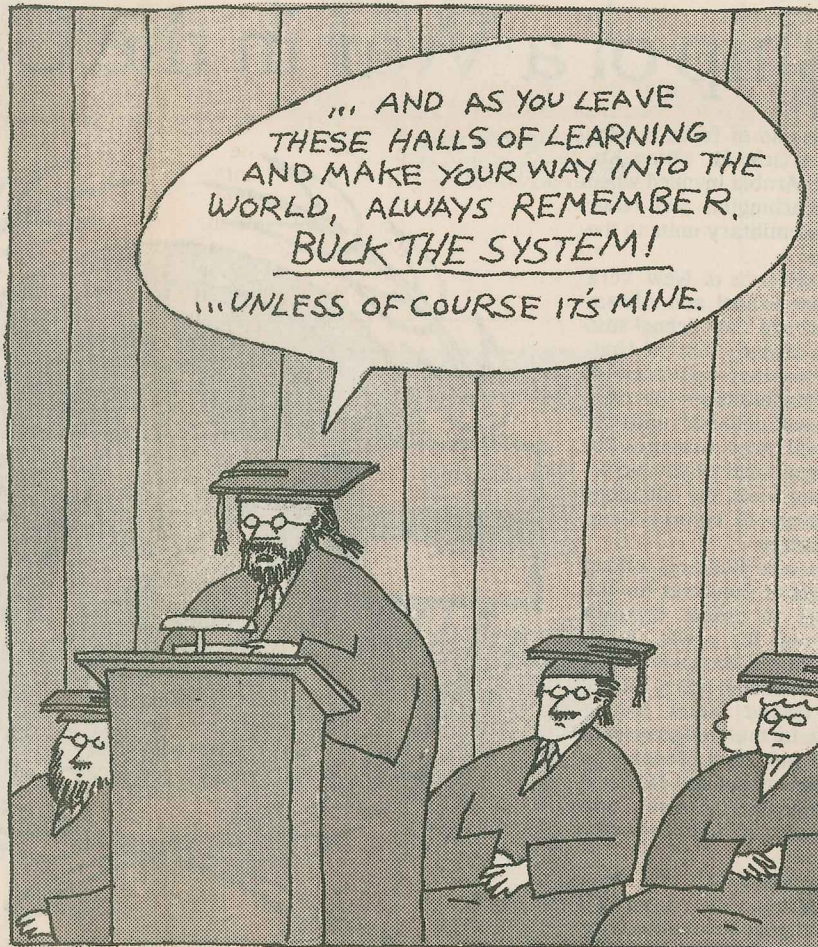
Drawing on the theories of Marxist and deconstructionist literary critics, some even question the very notion that there is such a thing as disinterested, objective scholarship. Some conservatives see a paradox in this.

"Those who are critics of objectivity, who reject claims about standards and quality, contradict themselves in believing so powerfully that they are the holders of the only truth," said Leon Botstein, the president of Bard College. Mr. Botstein, a critic of both the p.c.p.'s and their conservative adversaries, feels that the universities are being polarized into two intolerant factions. "The idea of candor and the deeper idea of civil discourse is dead," he said. "The victims are the students."

Professor Gribben, who opposed the curriculum change at the University of Texas, has been denounced in the campus newspaper as a right-winger; a rally was held on campus to harangue him. "I just wanted to question a few features and my world fell apart," he said.

The dubious implications of a politically correct orthodoxy have fallen under some scrutiny by the left, and that is what the conference last weekend at Berkeley was about.

In truth, a good deal of the conference was more an illustration of p.c.-ness than an examination of it. There was, for example, a panel discussion of the recently created "American cultures" requirement at Berkeley — in which students study the contributions that minority groups have made to American society. Though the



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course is controversial — it has been called "compulsory chapel" by its detractors — all four panelists were ardent defenders of the idea. Susan Schweik of the Berkeley English department defended the course, saying, "American culture already works on us as a compulsory chapel of racism." The new course, she argued, "lends itself by definition to complexities, to arguments between and within students, to diversity of voices and stances."

But there were worries expressed in papers and conversations that p.c.-ness has become a rigid concept, a new orthodoxy that does not allow for sufficient complexity in scholarship or even much clarity in thinking. One speaker, Michel Chaouli, a graduate student in comparative literature at Berkeley, said that "politically correct discourse is a kind of fundamentalism," one that gives rise to "pre-fab opinions." Among its features, he said, are "tenacity, sanctimoniousness, huffiness, a stubborn lack of a sense of humor."

Mr. Chaouli's paper was probably the most frontal assault on p.c.-ness at the conference, most of whose participants were rather gingerly in their criticisms, allowing that, yes, some p.c. ideas needed refinement, but the overall thrust of the p.c. program remained, as it were, correct. There was no challenge to such ideas as unequivocal support for affirmative action or the legitimacy of gay and lesbian studies.

When Mr. Chaouli referred to the belief in an unsympathetic power structure dominating American life as "a fantasm," he was immediately reprimanded and accused of being a "right-winger" by a member of the audience. Mr. Chaouli's critic said his ideas flew in the face of what everybody knew to be true, namely that American society was, of course, hegemonic.