Are You Telling Me that I'm Politically Correct?: An Investigation of Representations of the 'Politically Correct'

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actively promoting the military solution a la the Washington Post. When, on the day of the invasion of Kuwait, Bush attacked Iraq’s “naked aggression” of Kuwait but did not call for a military intervention, the Times R.W. Apple, titled his front-page story “Naked Aggression” and the Times’s editorialist opined: “The U.S. has no treaty obligation to come to Kuwait’s aid. But the gulf states and most nations still look to Washington for leadership and help in organizing action. President Bush has responded with the right lead—a strong national stand and a strong push for collective diplomacy” (Aug. 3, 1990). When, shortly thereafter, Bush sent U.S. troops to Saudi Arabia, the Times quickly got on board, writing in an August 9 editorial appropriately titled “The U.S. Stands Up. Who Else?”: “President Bush has drawn a line in the sand, committing U.S. forces to face down Saddam Hussein.... On balance, he has made the right choice in the right way.”

Works Cited


Are You Telling Me that I’m Politically Correct?: An Investigation of Representations of the ‘Politically Correct’

By Gary Weissman

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Recent articles on political correctness (PC), such as those appearing in New York, Newsweek and Time magazines, portray PC as a threat to truth, freedom, academic rigour, and American values. Instead of seeing PC as a potentially constructive moment in the development of non-coercive knowledges of self and others, many popular representations have construed an inverse logic. Subsequently these representations of PC become indirect affirmations of entrenched prejudices, especially about class, race, and gender.

Are you politically correct? Instead of providing my own definition of PC, in order to answer this question, I will examine the manipulation of this term in recent popular media representations.

Are we politically correct? And more importantly, are we white?

“Are you politically correct?”


Rather than answering these questions posed on the cover of the 21 January 1991 issue of New York magazine, one needs to investigate the strategy of this line of questioning. The address to the magazine’s potential consumer inherent in the first question— are you politically correct—gives way to indirect inquiry—am I misogynistic... am I guilty of racism... do I say ‘Indian’ instead of ‘Native American’. Why does the question “are you politically correct” transform itself into “am I politically correct”? On the one hand the ‘I’ is synonymous with the ‘you’, the consumer who, when responding to the first question, asks “Well am I politically correct?” and then trails into the series of questions provided, as if the tally of answers will provide an overall ‘yes’ or ‘no’ as to whether one is politically correct. But on the other hand the ‘I’ can be identified as the collegiate white male whose head fills the front cover of New York magazine. The questions which begin “Am I...” are superimposed over this youth’s face; it is as if he is asking himself these questions. These questions
float, in a sense, in a space between the direct gaze of the collegiate white male (whose 'look' directly addresses the consumer) and the gaze of the consumer. The consumer and the collegiate white male address one another and the posed questions simultaneously. This double signification of 'I' ('I as me, the consumer, or as he, the face on the cover) is informed by a certain strategy.

This issue of New York magazine appeared under two different versions of its cover: one featuring a young man's head, the other featuring a young woman's. Thus the identification process for both a female and male consumer has been provided for, to a certain extent; notably, both the man and woman are white. Inside either cover, the man and woman are united in a small photograph on the contents page. Here, with their rigid poses and lifeless expressions, they take on the appearance of mannequins. And, like mannequins, they have been attired and positioned for display to project a certain image. Yet this image is not a simple one; both the woman and man strike me as fulfilling stereotypes of young conservatives, with their conventional upper middle-class dress and clean-cut 'good looks'. The man steadfastly adheres to this stereotype, whereas the woman deviates from this cliche model with the pro-E.R.A. and "Silence=Death" buttons attached to the lapels of her modish sports coat (and her very short haircut can be interpreted as yet another 'radical' element). Buttons are similarly established as politically correct icons in Newsweek magazine, where a photograph showing dozens of buttons ('Pro-Choice,' 'Wimpooch Bush' and "DIE YUPPIE SCUM" number among them) appears with the caption, "For those who wear their politics on their denim: PC buttons" (54). The young man and woman characterize two types of victims of political correct-

ness standardly represented by the media, with political correctness being understood here precisely as a "sort of demand for intellectual conformity, enforced with harassment and intimidation" (35):

(1) The victim is the white individual who is harassed by the politically correct, for as New York magazine asserts, "Indeed, making people watch what they say is the central preoccupation of politically correct students" (37).

(2) The victim is the white individual who is intimidated into joining "this peculiar intellectual cult," such as those students who, deviating from politically correct thinking, are required by their universities "to undergo thought reform" (35).

The young man, presented as that last uncompromising defender of the traditions and values of Western culture and American society, connotes this first type of victim, whereas the young woman, doubtless because she is female and therefore not above suspicion of being a feminist-connotes the second type of victim. This is made visible by the pro-E.R.A. button she wears on her right lapel; this button represents the vulnerable point through which politically correct thinking has accessed and contaminated her, whereas the "Silence=Death" button on the left lapel indicates how the spread of politically correct thinking through her system has led her to sympathize with "radical homosexuals," a politically correct faction which, along with multiculturalists, Marxists, New Historians and feminists, constitutes the "eclectic group" of new fundamentalists identified by New York magazine (34). At the same time this depiction is rather unconvincing because the politically correct signs (the two buttons) overlay a considerably more developed conservative facade. This failure to represent the politically correct element believably has its own strategy. The politically correct signs of contamination are superficial and unnatural, out of place on the upper middle-class white citizen. They are trendy political convictions (literally) pinned on to a more wholesome, traditional white-bred element. That the representation of the young conservative element may also fail to be convincing due to over-stylization is, however, an unintentional failure of the magazine's propaganda. Michael Berube writes in The Village Voice that the New York article could not work as invective (far less as journalism) if it did not presume a high
degree of ignorance among its readers” (34). Consumers’ ignorance is supposed from the start, with the assumption that the man and woman on the magazine’s covers and contents page will be perceived as actual students ‘at risk’ from political correctness, and not as models posing for commercial photographs designed to sell New York magazine and ‘political correctness’ as a news story.

 Whereas the photograph on the contents page allows the consumer to make further inferences as to the social and political leanings of the woman and man featured on the front covers of the magazine, it is important to note that, as they are portrayed on the covers, the relations of the woman and man to political correctness remain ambiguous. The woman and man may answer ‘yes’ or ‘no’ to the questions; most importantly, as white individuals they are victims of politically correct harassment and intimidation either way. The series of “Am I...” questions on the cover of New York magazine indicate that only a ‘no’ to the question “Are you politically correct?” constitutes a serious answer, as Bruce Robbins asks, “Hearing the term ‘animal companion’, who will stay to discover that ‘logocentric’ actually belongs to a critique of the race-and-gender essentialisms of which PC stands accused?” (153). Furthermore, to say ‘yes’ to the initial question is to admit to being misogynistic, patriarchal, etc.—although, curiously enough, elsewhere in New York magazine, political correctness is not represented as an ideology encouraging introspection, the examination of one’s own political and social identity. Rather, political correctness is a “sort of demand for intellectual conformity” enforced by making others watch what they say by denouncing them with accusations of racism and sexism (35). The consumer, then, is never truly intended to entertain the question of whether he or she is politically correct; if nothing else, to expect a ready answer would be to assume that the consumer had significant prior knowledge of the term ‘politically correct’. Rather, the consumer is manipulated to direct the question to his or her double on the cover, who, like the consumer, remains voiceless. The consumer who identifies with the face on the magazine’s cover plays into the magazine’s strategy, wondering how the collegiate white youth would answer the question “Are you politically correct?”, knowing that a ‘no’ answer is the correct answer—and therefore the consumer’s own answer—the consumer, in effect, wonders if the collegiate white youth is not on the same ‘side’. Is the collegiate white youth on ‘our’ side or ‘their’ side? Here there is a conflict, for the identification with the representation of the white collegiate youth has already located him or her on ‘our’ side. This is because, after all, the answer to that more important question, “Are you white?” is unabashedly ‘yes’. Thus the white individual who answers ‘Yes, I am politically correct,’ must also be seen as a victim of political correctness, for he or she is still one of us; and political correctness must be represented as a cult enforced by thought police, a ‘fanatic ‘progressive’ force’ that can brainwash one of our own. The fact that this issue of New York magazine appeared under two covers so as to represent both the male and female white consumer with ties to higher education, and therefore a certain class affiliation, speaks very well for the magazine’s disinterest in recognizing a non-white readership or covering a story from a perspective which is not explicitly that of the white consumer. To try to answer the questions posed on the cover of New York magazine is to submit to the magazine’s strategy, since in this instance the magazine has a monopoly on the meaning (or lack of meaning) it assigns to the term ‘politically correct’. Rather than answering “Are you politically correct?”, one should ask: Who is being asked this question? Who is not? Why is this question being asked? What answer is being pushed as the ‘correct’ one? What is meant here by ‘politically correct’?

The politics of correctness, as seen in black and white

New York magazine’s cover article, “Are You Politically Correct?” (which has been reprinted in Reader’s Digest) opens with the sad tale of a white middle-aged history professor at Harvard University:

“Racist.”
“Racist!”
“The man is a racist!”
“A racist!”

Such denunciations, hissed in tones of self-righteousness and contempt, vicious and vengeful, furious, smoking with hatred—such denunciations haunted Stephen Themstrom for weeks. Whenever he walked through the campus that spring, down Harvard’s brick pathways, under the arched gates, past the fluttering elms, he found it hard not to imagine the pointing fingers, the whispers. Racist. There goes the racist. It was hellish, this persecution. Themstrom couldn’t sleep. His nerves were frayed, his temper raw. He was making his family miserable. And the worst thing was that he didn’t know who was calling him a racist, or why. (32)

As the article goes on to explain, Themstrom knew that someone was calling him a racist because “all of a sudden, in the fall of 1987, articles began to appear in the Harvard Crimson accusing Themstrom and [historian Bernard] Bailyn of ‘racial insensitivity’ in ‘People of America’,” the class they co-taught on the history of race relations in the United States. Two students from the lecture course eventually identified themselves as “the sources for the articles” anonymously printed in the school paper. (New York leaves it unclear whether the students, as inside ‘sources’ on the class, wrote the articles themselves). The two students, “asked to explain their grievances,” did present a six-page letter—but before considering this I would like to backtrack. Now we know that Themstrom was accused of "racial insensitivity" in anonymous articles in the school newspaper, and that his accusers were two students in his lecture course on the history of race relations in the United States. We can now ask: who is being quoted as hissing such denunciations as "Racist!" and "The man is a racist!"?
The actual name-caller is none other than the article’s author, John Taylor, who has taken it upon himself to orchestrate this presentation playing upon the repetition of the word ‘racist’. These ‘denunciations’ reappear in the body of the first full paragraph. “Racist. There goes the racist” – tellingly no longer in quotes. Taylor re-uses this technique of presenting a series of slurs as if he is directly quoting politically correct students (when in fact these exclamations can be attributed to no one but Taylor) twice more in his article: once to begin a section under the heading “The Gender Feminists and Date Rape” (“Misogynistic!” “Patriarchal!” “Gynophobic!” “Phallocentric!”) and then to conclude the article with three ‘politically correct’ exclamations (“Paternalistic!” “Racist!” “Fascist!”).

Still the first series of quoted exclamations remains unique in that Taylor describes their character in depth, writing that ‘such denunciations’ are hissed in tones of self-righteousness and contempt; they are vicious and vengeful and furious and smoking with hatred; they haunted Stephan Thernstrom for weeks. The word ‘haunted’ hints mildly at the unreal nature of what distresses Thernstrom; then we read that Thernstrom found it hard not to imagine “the pointing fingers and whispers.” Taylor is all too ready to report in dramatic detail the tones of voices that have, in fact, never hissed, whispered or shouted the denunciations quoted in his article. Thus the politically correct is represented by faceless voices conjured out of thin air by Taylor and introduced as a threat to the white individual, with the spotlight on white victim Stephan Thernstrom. In his article “What Happened at Harvard” in The Nation, Jon Wiener writes that when he asked Thernstrom if the opening passage of Taylor’s article was accurate, he replied, “I was appalled when I first saw that. Nothing like that ever happened.” However, Thernstrom, like Taylor, cannot resist adopting the role of white victim; while acknowledging that the opening passage is a misrepresentation, or disinformation, he legitimizes it as “artistic license, describing how it felt to be Thernstrom in that period, and that part is absolutely true” (386).

Regarding actual living and breathing embodiments of political correctness, the article provides no information as to the identities of the two students who presented the six-page letter to Thernstrom and Bailyn — they remain both faceless and voiceless; in point of fact, they are invisible. Regarding their letter, Taylor writes:

Bailyn’s crime had been to read from the diary of a southern planter without giving equal time to the recollections of a slave. This, to the students, amounted to a covert defense of slavery. Bailyn, who has won two Pulitzer Prizes, had pointed out during the lecture that no journals, diaries, or letters written by slaves had ever been found. He had explained to the class that all he could do was read the planter’s diary and use it to speculate about the experience of slaves. (34)

As numerous first-hand accounts written by slaves exist today — including, for instance, A Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself — this explanation is nonsensical. Furthermore, even if a multitude of slave narratives had never been written, the notion that Pulitzer Prize-winning Harvard professor Bernard Bailyn could do nothing more than read from the diary of a white slave owner in order to enlighten his class on the experience of the black slave is ludicrous. But New York can rely on a high degree of ignorance among its consumers, who have only the vaguest awareness of the history of slavery and racial discrimination in America.

Certain unanswered questions remain. Why does New York magazine resort to an incident from 1987 to begin its 1991 story on the politically correct, especially when this incident seems to provide such a weak example of a so-called demagogic and fanatical new fundamentalism? Certainly it makes sense that “Peopling of America,” a lecture course on the history of race relations in the United States, would be one of the more controversial classes, given that, as Newsweek magazine generically puts it, “the conflict between blacks and whites remains particularly thorny because of America’s history of slavery and discrimination” (23). Furthermore, given that “Thernstrom had assigned a book to the class that mentioned that some people regarded affirmative-action as preferential treatment” and that “most egregiously, Thernstrom had endorsed, in class, Patrick Moynihan’s emphasis on the breakup of the black family as a cause of persistent black poverty,” the complaints against the course come as no surprise (34). No ‘new fundamentalism’ or ‘peculiar intellectual cult’ need be called upon or coined to explain students’ grievances or accusations, given the course’s polemical agenda. However, the scenario is not represented primarily as a controversy concerning issues of racism, per se, but as an example of the ‘politically correct’ threat to freedom of speech and the pursuit of truth.

Here a brief consideration of Newsweek’s representations of the politically active African-American may shed some light on New York’s strategies. In “Taking Offense”, a December 1990 article on the politically correct, Newsweek claims that “most organizations of minority students, feminists and gays” share a politically correct agenda to eliminate all prejudice, from “the petty sort to the grand prejudice” that “the intellectual tradition of Western Europe occupies the central place in the history of civilization” (48); then in “Race on Campus: Failing the Test?,” a May 1991 article in “The New Politics of Race” issue, Newsweek reports that “Blacks (not to mention Hispanics and Asian-Americans) are becoming more assertive of their separate ethnic identities, of their right to protest even the most casual snub or slight, and of their need for firmer support from college authorities” (27). Organizations of minority students share the new politics of correctness, whereas Blacks (not to mention Hispanics and Asian-Americans) are reflecting the new politics of race. The “New Politics of Race” issue surfaces as the ‘return of the repressed’, the reappearance of what is hidden in “Taking Offense,” as well as Taylor’s “Are You Politically Correct?” article. With “Race on Campus: Failing the Test?” Newsweek reports...
that “Whites, wary of increasing competition for jobs and mindful of conserva-
tive attacks on liberal social policies, increasingly object to affirmative-action
and to the accusation that they are racists, too” (27). Here the conflict is made
much more explicit as a struggle between blacks and wary whites over social
policies and practices that recognize ethnic identities, rather than as a struggle
between opponents of PC and members of the new orthodoxy over the place of
the grand prejudice.

The *New York* article plays upon both conceptions of the politically active,
vocal student who asserts the recognition of non-white identities. On the one
hand the article attempts to delegitimize so-called politics of race by enveloning
them in politically correct fundamentalism, while on the other hand the article
implies that what makes the politically correct threatening to white traditions
and white culture are these very politics of race. For instance, by leaving the
ethnic identities of Bailyn and the two students unmentioned, Taylor is able to
represent the two students as politically correct ‘New Fascists’ harping on a
politically correct agenda rather than as two Harvard University students
“assertive of their separate ethnic identities, of their right to protest even the
most casual snub or slight, and of their need for firmer support from college
authorities.” Yet it remains most clear that the very threat of their so-called
politically correct agenda is that it asserts the separate ethnic identity of
African-Americans.

The two students who charged Themstrom with ‘racial insensitivity’ (and
not racism or fascism) function much in the same way as the white upper
middle-class collegiate youths on the covers of *New York* magazine, in that their
relation to the politically correct is left open. Here each politically correct
student is either the individual who, by virtue of being African-American, is
politically correct, or the individual who, although white, has joined “this
peculiar intellectual cult” (while the students may be Hispanic, Asian-Ameri-
can, etc., the article infers such a black/white opposition). The connoted conflict
between blacks and whites is hidden behind euphemisms — the ‘politically
correct’, ‘the New Fascists’, ‘the new fundamentalists’, ‘Afrocentrists’, etc.—
thereby allowing Taylor to ridicule and disparage certain segments of society
without clearly joining the ranks of those upper middle-class college students
who, according to *Newsweek*, have been shouting racial slurs with disturbing
frequency, contributing to “the apparent rise in racial incidents of all sorts—
name-calling, scapegoating, accusations and recrimination” (27). At the same
time, the racial conflict is only superficially hidden, so that Taylor may appeal
to white paranoia, white fears of ‘take over’ and an end to white privilege. The
fear of the assertion of separate ethnic identities into ‘our’ space of Western
culture and American society extends to include anxiety related to the assertion
of non-white, non-upper middle-class, non-male, and non-heterosexual iden-
tities. Class is not recognized as an issue by the mainstream media, which
prefers to portray America as a classless society; sexism is omnipresent, considered a problem only in cases of rape and sexual harassment, at which
times the identities of women are examined by men for signs of degeneracy; the
ridiculing of gays and lesbians is celebrated with much laughter; race, however,
is a most touchy subject. Sexism and homophobia are largely tolerated and
reinforced by mainstream media, and while the same can and should be said of
racism, openly racist views are taboo. And therefore, as Alexander Cockburn
(1991) has written, race is “the core of all the fuss.”

Joking about prejudice of a petty sort

“The content of PC is, in some respects, uncontroversial: who would defend racism?” asks the *Newsweek* article “Taking Offense” (49). Unlike
Taylor, Adler does not so much blame the politically correct for ‘politicizing’
American campuses, as “the conventional weapons of campus politics” have
always existed; the difference is that radical professors are now gaining access
to them (48). Overall, Adler cannot decide if the so-called content of ‘PC’ is,
its self, a threat to the quality of American values. On the one hand, the ‘PC’
conflict is a sign that “the university makes the transition—somewhat ahead of
the rest of society—toward its multiethnic future” (54). On the other hand,
“What is distressing is that at the university, of all places, tolerance has to be
imposed rather than taught, and that 'progress' so often is just the replacement
of one repressive orthodoxy by another” (49). Having equated political correct-
ness with tolerance, Adler is unable to decide if ‘PC’ is progressive or repressive.
His solution is to charge that tolerance is not taught at universities, but imposed.
Yet upon taking this stance, Adler does not feel required in the least to explain
how tolerance may be taught to racists and bigots in a way the mainstream
media will not criticize and deride as “imposing.”

Although Adler states that in regard to racism the content of ‘PC’ is
uncontroversial, this is not the case, it seems, it seems, in regard to prejudice “of
the petty sort that shows up on sophomore dorm walls” (48) Never mind the
fact that dormitory walls regularly bear swastikas and graffiti of this nature;
here *Newsweek* refers to an event summarized in the blurb on its contents page
in this fashion: “A university student is banished for posting a jocular ban
against homosexuals” (3). The article itself begins with the re-telling of this
event:

Perhaps Nina Wu actually did not like gays. More likely, she thought
she was being funny when she allegedly put up a sign on the door to
her dorm room listing “people who are shot on sight”—among them,
“preppies,” “bimbos,” “men without chest hair” and “homos.” No
protests were heard from representatives of the first three categories,
but UConn’s gay community was more forthright in asserting its
prerogatives (48).
disClosurE: The Buying and Selling of Culture

The first endeavor is to clear Nina Wu’s name—she doesn’t hate gays, she just thinks they’re funny. The obvious question stands, what if instead of ‘homos’, the list of “people who are shot on sight” had included, say, ‘niggers’, ‘dagos’, ‘kikes’ or ‘spics’? (These are terms shouted at the viewer in a quick succession of scenes in Spike Lee’s film, Do The Right Thing. While the viewer may find these scenes to be humorous, they are also shocking and disturbing, and certainly could not be described as ‘jocular’, i.e. jestful, merry, good-humored.) What makes a sign that announces ‘homos’ will be shot on sight, posted on the door of a sophomore dormitory that houses, it may be assumed, people of varied sexual orientations, a “jocular ban against homosexuals”? What makes a ban against homosexuals jocular? Can the T-shirts with the words “Club Faggots Not Seals” printed on them, worn by fraternity members at Syracuse University, be considered yet another jocular ban against homosexuals? (Cockburn 690) Perhaps Newsweek is unaware of its implicit evaluation of the content of ‘PC’: racism cannot be defended, but the harassment of gays is fine so long as it remains within the bounds of good humor. Newsweek even complicity adds to the jocularity, with the comment that representatives of the first three categories made no protests to being included on the sign. The joke seems to be that while, of course, there are no “representatives of the first three categories”—for there are, of course, no collectives of bimbos or men without chest hair—there actually is a collective of homos at the University of Connecticut, and, on top of that, representatives of the homo category actually take themselves seriously enough to take offense and assert their rights.

What Jerry Adler, the main author of “Taking Offense,” does not find humorous is the following: “Found guilty last year in a campus administrative hearing, Wu was… what would you guess? Reprimanded? Ordered to write a letter of apology? No, Wu was ordered to move off campus and forbidden to set foot in any university dormitories or cafeterias” (48). Placing questions of journalistic accuracy aside, one may ask why there is this conflation of the legitimacy of the gay community to take offense at the sign with Wu’s dorm room door, and the ruling of the campus administration. That is, one may agree or disagree with the administrative ruling, but evaluating the act of ‘taking offense’ is a separate matter; the gay community did not, after all, find Wu guilty or decide her punishment. The actual problem—the question of how are colleges and universities to deal with an apparent rise of racist, homophobic and sexist incidents among its student body—remains unsaid, because to voice such concerns would be to detract from the portrayal of “the tyranny of PC,” relocating oppressive behavior among those students who, in fact, largely target the same ‘categories’ of students Adler labels ‘PC’—minority, gay and female students. In order to justify the conflation of students labeled ‘PC’ with the restrictive speech codes imposed by some colleges, and to locate the motivation behind these tougher codes not in student behavior but in the political manipulations of radical professors, Adler creates a loosely held together three-tier structure of the politically correct: first there are “most organizations of minority students, feminists and gays” (lesbians, it may be supposed, must be subsumed under the category ‘feminists’); second, “a generation of campus radicals who grew up in the 60s and are now achieving positions of academic influence”; and third, “the administration” when the campus radicals have them “on their side” (48). Perhaps, then, the report in The New York Times (25 September 1991) that “the American Council of Education conducted a survey of college administrators that indicated that even the vaguest signs of what is being condemned as political correctness were evident on less than 10 percent of college campuses” can be disregarded, relying as it does on administrations which may be on ‘their’ side.

Even while elaborating on “the march of PC across American campuses” (49), a project that implicitly falls back on the three-tier system, Adler claims ignorance of the student professor-administrator conspiracy he has constructed: “There is no conspiracy here, just a creed, a set of beliefs and expressions which students from places as diverse as Sarah Lawrence and San Francisco State recognize instantly as ‘PC’—politically correct” (48-9). Notably, Adler returns to a consideration of the student, even providing a caricature of an actual embodiment of political correctness:

Plunk down a professor from Princeton, say, in the University of Wisconsin at Madison, show him a student in a tie-dyed T-shirt with open-toed sandals and a grubby knapsack dangling a student-union issue, environmentally sound, reusable red plastic cup, and he’ll recognize the type instantly. It’s “PC Person,” an archetype that has now been certified in the official chronicles of American culture, the comic pages. Jeff Shesol, a student cartoonist at Brown, created him as an enforcer of radical cant, so sensitive to potential slights that he even knows the correct euphemism for 9-year-old “girls.” He calls them “pre-women.” This is appalling, or would be if it were true. (49)

Interestingly enough, the paradigmatically correct student is not portrayed as a minority student or a woman, but as a parody of the campus radical who grew up in the sixties. And, when the type recognized by a professor from, say, Princeton (a quality university like Harvard, with quality professors like Stephen Thernstrom) is colluded with the archetype of ‘PC Person’, the paradigmatically correct student can be identified as a definite white male. As with the New York article, “Taking Offense” speaks to the white consumer, presenting political correctness as a threat to the white individual. The conjured image of the white male, with his sixties affectations (signs of trendy political convictions, obsolete and out of place on the upper middle-class white citizen), serves both as a euphemism for an actual depiction of the enemy, and as a symbol of what Adler, like Taylor, wants the consumer to feel is most at stake: the traditions and values of Western culture and tradition (here threatened by a resurgence of sixties liberalism). This portrayal of ‘PC Person’ is notably counterbalanced by the assimilation of Nina Wu as a victim of politically correct harassment.
Shesol's comic serves as yet another example of misrepresentation or disinformation in the representation of the politically correct. That Shesol's treatment of political correctness has been so readily incorporated by the mainstream media is indicative of the media's overall coverage or contrivance of this issue; mainstream media hardly transcends the positions and tactics of college students like Shesol and Wu. The comic begins with the introduction, "Politically Correct Person's archenemy, Insensitive Man, is once again up to no good..." (53). Insensitive Man is shown kneeling beside a boy in a sandbox. From a series of diagonal lines drawn on the side of the boy's head, it can be said with some certainty that Shesol intends this character to be read as 'black'. In the first panel Insensitive Man says to this boy, "Hey Kid... See her? She's of the opposite sex. Know what we call 'em?" "What?" asks the boy. In the next panel Insensitive Man answers, "Chicks." The boy repeats this word and Politically Correct Person, his head just appearing in the frame, yells, "Hey!" In the third panel Politically Correct Person, garbed as Superman, only with a 'PC' insignia rather than an 'S' on his chest, explains, "We don't call them 'chicks'! Or 'girls'! They're women!" In the fourth and final panel the boy says, "They're nine years old." Politically Correct Man then replies, "Well, they're pre-women."

The comic operates much on the same level as a question on New York magazine's cover, in place of "Do I say 'pet' instead of 'animal companion'?" Shesol has substituted "Do I say 'girl' instead of 'pre-woman'?" But what if in the fourth and final panel of Shesol's comic the boy had said, "They're nineteen years old," and Politically Correct Person had then replied, "Well, they're women?" In this case, the 'joke' is no longer funny, or rather, there is no joke. The joke requires the misrepresentation of what actually threatens Shesol — namely, that some female college students, generally between eighteen and twenty-one years of age, have been and may continue to be annoyed when he refers to them as 'girls'. In the comic these college age women are absent, replaced by less threatening nine year old girls, and even these nine year old girls are absent in that they are not pictured. Neither female college students nor nine year old girls represent the 'PC' threat; instead, the white male takes their place as 'PC Person', "enforcer of radical cant," in order to sabotage the representation of the politically correct from the very start by presenting 'political correctness' as an absurd parody of itself.

Political correctness is, for the most part, accurately depicted as a controversy played out in the media by white males. The females outside the frame of Shesol's comic, there only in a marginal capacity to be talked about by males, represent those labeled 'politically-correct' in the mainstream media's framing of 'PC' as a news story. As the real source of anxiety behind the strip, they are present as an absence. The African-American character's presence in the comic signifies the absence of any direct mention of another source of anxiety, race relations. The boy in the comic is shown as African-American because, in hiding an attack on women behind an attack on the politically correct, Shesol must pay the price of indirectly attacking all those besides 'feminists' included by the term 'politically correct', including 'minority students'. That is, to delegitimize a concern with sexism is to delegitimize a concern with racism, since both of these concerns now fall under the rubric of politically correctness (as on the cover of New York magazine). Unlike sexism, a prejudice of a petty sort, racism is taboo, and so Shesol is concerned with making it clear that he is not racist by imposing a kind of affirmative-action program in his comic; in effect, like Adler he is saying: "Who would defend racism?" If Shesol did not have this concern, perhaps his strip might have ridiculed the student who prefers the term 'African-American', rather than the student who prefers the term 'woman'.

The other PC: 'Politically Christian'

New York magazine vigorously sets up a dichotomy between the politically correct and the conservative, with liberalism and progressive thought completely enveloped by 'politically correct' left-wing extremism, and conservatism remaining as the 'common sense' option to this new fundamentalism. Conservatism takes its place in the political center as the naturalized middle ground between various fundamentalisms. Taylor writes:

When the Christian-fundamentalist uprising began in the late seventies, Americans on the left sneered at the Bible thumpers... They heaped scorn on the evangelists... and the pious hypocrites who tried to legislate patriotism and Christianity through school prayer and the Pledge of Allegiance. This last effort was considered particularly heinous. Those right-wing demagogues were interfering with individual liberties!... But curiously enough in the past few years, a new son of fundamentalism has arisen precisely among those people who were most appalled by Christian fundamentalism. (34)

"Right-thinking people" (36) are "just as demagogic and fanatical" as those
right-wing demagogues, the Christian-fundamentalists. Taylor fails to mention that the traditional, politically conservative middle ground is infested by Christianity as well. He writes, “For most of the twentieth century, professors in the humanities modeled themselves on their counterparts in the natural sciences. They thought of themselves as specialists in the disinterested pursuit of truth” (34). John S. Lutz, a junior at Duke University and student editor-in-chief of Campus: America’s Student Newspaper, is much more forthright in relating the pursuit of ‘truth’ to Christianity rather than the natural sciences. In the editorial to Campus’ spring 1991 issue, “The Feminist Assault on the University,” he writes:

...Duke University was founded on a commitment to the eternal union of religion and knowledge (erudito et religio) and considered its foremost purpose the education of persons in accord with the traditional intellectual norms of Western civilization, and with a deep respect for Christianity. Duke’s original vision, however, has been replaced by ideological programs of ‘multiculturalism’, feminism, and deconstruction. And in light of the recent exposure such ‘politically correct’ programs have received in the national media, can it seriously be argued that the university has been improved by these substitutions, that students will be better educated as a result?

In recent years, changes in accord with ‘political correctness’ have forced the university off its designated path: the search for truth, educating and training scholars through classical liberal education, and preparing students for the professions.

Campus, which claims to be the only national publication for college students written and edited by students, is published by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute (ISI). This organization spells out its own ideological program in promotional copy on the inside back cover of Campus: “ISI believes that if America is to prosper as a free society, her young people must have a solid understanding and respect for the ideas and institutions that make America great: private property and free market economy, limited government, individual liberty and personal responsibility, the rule of law, and moral norms based on classical and Judeo-Christian thought.” The publication’s ideological ties are clearly presented on the “Bulletin Board” page (24). Campus advertises its summer school programs, including a class titled “A Search for Truth,” involving “a close examination of the humanities guided by the works of Christian and Classical philosophers.” Under the heading “Practical Training For Young Conservatives” two programs based in Washington, D.C. are advertised: the Leadership Institute offers a three-day course that “teaches young conservatives how to pass the Foreign Service Exam and how to gain employment in the U.S. State Department,” while the Capitol Hill Training School offers a two-day course through which “conservatives gain valuable training for placement on Congressional staffs.” Copy publicizing the Madison Center’s Student Forum for conservative minority students reads: “Enterprising minority students around the country are organizing to challenge the conventional wisdom that minorities are all, by nature, politically left of center.” A pro-life group calling themselves the University Faculty for Life and the National Association of Scholars are listed on the “Bulletin Board” as well. Although Campus advertises these programs and institutes, these are not paid advertisements; the “Bulletin Board” page is not advertising space, but a separate department listed on the magazine’s contents page, alongside other departments such as “Reviews” and “Humor.”

Perhaps Dinesh D’Souza best embodies a combination of Christianity and conservatism. Since emigrating from India in 1978, D’Souza has, in the words of Michael Berube, “spent the past thirteen years steadily moving up the national conservative food chain.” At Dartmouth College in 1980 he was a founding editor of The Dartmouth Review, one of the conservative student newspapers set up and funded by right-wing foundations like the Madison Center and the Olin Foundation. While D’Souza worked for the paper it printed a parody statement from a hypothetical affirmative-action candidate which read, “Now we be comin’ to Dartmouth and be up over our ‘fros in studies, but we still be not graduatin’ Phi Beta Kappa,” as well as documents stolen from the office of the Gay Student Alliance (Menand 100). After graduating college in 1983 he worked as a domestic policy analyst for the Reagan Administration. In 1988 he worked for the Bush-Quayle campaign, soliciting Catholic votes (Stimpson 379). As a research fellow at the conservative American Enterprise Institute, he wrote Illiberal Education: The Politics of Race and Sex on Campus, under a grant from the Olin Foundation (Wiener 388). Wiener writes, “After ten years of searching for and cultivating young neoconservative ideologues, the Olin Foundation and the American Enterprise finally got everything they could hope for in Dinesh D’Souza and his book: a best-seller attacking multiculturalism and the campus left and, best of all, a right-wing book written by a young person of color” (388). This book, which first appeared as the long essay “Illiberal Education” in The Atlantic Monthly (March 1991), helped popularize the notion that American colleges are in decline because “the old guard” is being displaced by a new generation of academics “weaned on the assorted ideologies of the late 1960’s, such as the movement for black separatism and the burgeoning causes of feminism and gay rights” (56). Prior to Illiberal Education, D’Souza had written a laudatory biography of Jerry Falwell (Stimpson 379).

D’Souza is quoted in The New York Times (25 September 1991) as saying, “I am comfortable describing myself as a conservative in politics, but I am a liberal when it comes to education. You don’t have to agree with me on the need to deploy strategic missile defense to agree on the importance of high standards and free speech.” While most would agree on importance of high standards and free speech, we may remain uncertain on whether we share D’Souza’s conception of what constitutes “high standards.” In particular, his high standards for what should constitute the canon of books taught in literature classes remain...
hidden in notions of the 'disinterested pursuit of truth'. He writes: that if a work "survives the scrutiny of serious minds over generations," this "collective literary judgment" determines the work is "a true classic; its reputation is protected from the charge of provinciality or faddishness. Thus its prestige acquires a timeless quality" (73). Roger Kimball, author of Tenured Radicals, expresses this thought as well: "It happens that some works have shown their insight, beauty, or truth to so many educated people for so long that failing to read them is tantamount to consigning oneself to the ranks of the ill-educated" (11). Apparently the collective judgment of serious minds and educated people does not represent 'ideological programs' or a political agenda, but objective truth. According to D'Souza, politically correct thinking which questions the supposed objectivity of this search for truth runs the risk of supporting fascism: "relativist theories create for totalitarian ideologies... The rejection of authority can sometimes result, paradoxically, in an embrace of authoritarianism" (78-79). Interestingly, the authority which determines high standards and what, in fact, constitutes truth remains ambiguous. For Kimball, the threat is not fascism, but regression into barbarism. If professors and students, "the privileged beneficiaries of the spiritual and material achievements of our history... out of perversity, ignorance, or malice... turn their backs on the culture that nourished them and made them what they are" then they reject culture and choose barbarism (13).

Newsweek magazine recently paid tribute to one such privileged beneficiary who did not turn his back on the culture that nourished him: Frank O'Malley, a professor whose present newsworthiness even predates that of Stephen Thernstrom. In "The Life of A Great Teacher" (21 October 1991) Kenneth L. Woodward writes:

In the late spring of 1957, students in Frank O'Malley's senior English class at Notre Dame turned in their final exams and started to leave. But the professor motioned them back to their seats for a final comment, as he always did. He had learned much from them, O'Malley said, and he hoped they had learned from him. "And now," he added, "let me tell you about the meaning of life." He then delivered a half-hour critique of modern culture from a Christian perspective that brought the applauding students to their feet. (60)

This article is written on the occasion of the reunion of two-hundred Notre Dame alumni who had been O'Malley's students; whether these men are gathered at a weekend symposium to honor O'Malley or the university's sesquicentennial remains unclear. Woodward expresses the motivation for his article when he identifies the "one very large question" that supposedly loomed throughout the weekend symposium: "where are O'Malley's faculty successors?" O'Malley, "a man who taught reading, writing— and caring" and felt that his obligation as a teacher was to assist in "the unique working out to manhood of each soul" of his students, is resurrected as the ideal professor. His "half-hour critique of modern culture from a Christian perspective" is celebrated some three decades after the fact to mark Christianity's exemption as an ideological program, its status as what is natural and true. "Deeply religious and contemptuous of specialists," O'Malley symbolizes a right-wing wishful return to erudito et religio, or what the editors of Jump Cut magazine call, "a demand that formerly 'invisible' (to them) concerns go back to seeming invisible" (128).

The discourse of crisis: what's in a name?

In "Illiberal Education" D'Souza writes that 'illiberalism' in American universities threatens the fate of the nation:

Numerous books, studies, and surveys have documented the alarming scientific and cultural illiteracy of American students. Parents, alumni, and civic leaders are justifiably anxious. Will the new policies in academia improve or damage the prospects for American political and economic competitiveness in the world? ... Will they make the United States an easier or more difficult place to govern wisely? (58)

This alarming cultural illiteracy can be better understood when included within a consideration of what John Trimbur calls the discourse of literacy in crisis, in his excellent essay "Literacy and the Discourse of Crisis." Fifteen years before Newsweek's cover read "Watch What You Say - THOUGHT POLICE-There's a 'Politically Correct' Way To Talk About Race, Sex and Ideas. Is This the New Enlightenment— Or the New McCarthyism?" its cover bore the words "Why Johnny Can't Write," along with a photograph of 'Johnny', a young white male who serves as a precursor to the collegiate white male on the cover of New York magazine or Newsweek's 'PC Person'. Interestingly enough, the "Why Johnny Can't Write" issue of Newsweek also features an article titled "Clio Tells Herstory," (72) co-written by Kenneth L. Woodward. The article reports, "Feminist scholars have long complained that history tells only half the story—the male half... For all their scholarly efforts, however, women historians have yet to develop a conceptual framework that distinguishes their field from other disciplines." Lorna Strauss, the dean of students at the University of Chicago, is quoted as saying, "There's a question whether it's a separate, identifiable, useful field of history." Thus, in retrospect, this issue of Newsweek can be seen as the 'politically correct' issue in embryonic form.

Merrill Shells' article, "Why Johnny Can't Write," (8 December 1975) starts with the sentence, "If your children are attending college, the chances are that when they graduate, they will be unable to write ordinary, expository English with any real degree of structure and lucidity" (58). However, Trimbur denies...
that Shells is actually concerned with the structure and lucidity of student prose, writing, "At stake in Shells's discourse of crisis is not whether students read and write better or worse than they did twenty or fifty years ago, but whether literacy can still draw lines of social distinction, mark status, and rank students in meritocratic order" (279). Shells' article plays upon the anxieties which threatened these lines of social distinction during the mid-seventies, "a time of energy crisis, declining productivity and 'stagflation'... diminished expectations, and increased competition for jobs and college admission" (278). As with political correctness, anxiety is displaced onto education, with the blame falling on teachers who bring sixties educational philosophies to the classroom, non-traditional schools of thought or 'relativist theories' (in this case, structural linguistics), social programs that benefit minorities and non-traditional "creative schools" (60). Trimbur writes:

For the middle class, the crisis of literacy standards appeared to deprive the schools of a fundamental measure to rank students in a meritocratic order, to certify the success of their children, and to legitimate the unequal outcomes of the others— the minorities, the poor, and the working class... But instead of fostering a critical examination of the connection among schooled literacy, upward mobility, and national prosperity... the prevailing discourse of crisis reinvites mythic powers in literacy, calling upon literacy to shore up a faltering meritocracy. (279)

The 'PC' opponents, in the age of the Reagan-Bush Administration, similarly call upon literacy, but of a more literal sort: cultural literacy. "The spoken word, while adding indisputable richness and variety to the language as a whole, is by its very nature ephemeral," Shells writes. "The written language remains the only effective vehicle for transmitting and debating a culture's ideas, values and goals" (65). Ironically enough, now being able to debate cultural ideas, values and goals is not the solution to the literacy crisis, but its cause. Literacy in writing is no longer ample, for it seems that with learning to write students do not automatically adopt hegemonic ideologies; now one must be literate in certain cultural beliefs and traditions, and uphold the high standards on which they are based, in order to be truly educated rather than politically indoctrinated.

Shells concludes his article with the statement, "In America today, as in the never-never world Alice discovered on her trip through the looking-glass, there are too many people intent on being masters of their language and too few willing to be its servants" (65). One may well wonder if 'Johnny' can't write because he is a servant unwilling to admit this to himself, or a master held down by too many servants who don't know their place— but one can guess. Shells is primarily concerned with what Trimbur calls the blurred lines "between 'us' and 'them', between what Shells so revealingly calls 'masters' and 'servants'" (279). According to Trimbur, the strategy of the literacy crisis is to re-delineate the discourses of literacy in crisis is not simply a nostalgic longing for a golden age of American education, but an antidemocratic attack on the educational reforms of the 1960s and 1970s, an offensive to stop affirmative action, remedial, and equal-opportunity programs in higher education and to firm up the meritocracy in order to consolidate the privileges of middle-class and upper middle class students. (283)

Trimbur's comments apply too well to the attack on 'political correctness'; as the editors of Jump Cut write, "College educated women increasingly expect to have careers competing with men. People of color are a more visible and active presence on campus and in public life. Many lesbian and gay students are out and outspoken." The breakdown of traditional privileges means that 'Johnny' might have new hardships: "Mediocre, straight white men, who in the past would have been carried along on their privilege, are the big losers in these changes. Now, those young white men who don't have the perseverance to compete will fall to the wayside. And academic disciplines that have been male preserves will just have to change" (127).

Trimbur writes that much of the power behind the discourse of literacy crisis is in an "ability to condense a broad range of cultural, social, political, and economic tensions into one central image" (277). The act of naming in order to provide a central image of 'us' versus 'them', 'our side versus their side, is a key ideological move...

...literacy crises are always strategic: They perform certain kinds of ideological work by giving a name to and thereby mastering (rhetorically if not actually) cultural anxieties released by demographic shifts, changes in the means of production, new relations and conflicts between classes and groups of people, and reconfigurations of cultural hegemony (286).

What is at stake in giving the name 'politically correct' to the myriad of present cultural anxieties? The origin of the term is uncertain; according to Alexander Cockburn, "the term 'politically correct'... got its start among the left as a joke on those who took commitment to the far edge of self-righteousness" (690). The editors of Jump Cut write "Originally, we used the term 'politically correct' or 'p.c.' in the left and feminist movements to chide and gently mock those who held a 'holier than thou' attitude in their political positions" (127). And according to Duke professor Cathy Davidson, "'PC and PI (Politically Incorrect)... apparently were coined in the '30s and resuscitated several years ago as ironic, hip, and self-mocking terms that intellectuals used against themselves" (9). In any case, the term 'politically correct' certainly pre-dates its co-option by the mainstream media, and its expansion by the right to include..."
not only self-deprecating intellectuals and left-wing extremists, but all of the left. Because the term 'politically correct' has been so completely taken over by right-wing media, it is important that this word no longer be used by the left, except in reference to the discourse of literacy in crisis that it names, that 'scare' manufactured by the media which claims that "the decline of American colleges" is currently taking place due to "a new leftist orthodoxy" (New York Times, 25 September 1991). That is, those on the left have really lost the freedom to lightheartedly refer to themselves or to self-righteous left-wing extremists as 'politically correct', as the term is, in a very real sense, no longer their own to use freely. The usage of the term to criticize anyone or anything reinforces the validity of its meaning in the mainstream media.

Because 'PC' incorporates both the silly (Do I say 'pet' instead of 'animal companion'?) and the socially and politically threatening (Am I guilty of racism, sexism, classism?) in one name, the terms 'politically correct' and 'political correctness' can be used in name-calling in a number of ways:

1. to downplay the legitimacy of something significant by designating it as something altogether silly and undeserving of real concern.
2. to designate something insignificant in order to further establish a link between 'PC' and such silliness or unimportance.
3. to serve as shorthand to identify something significant or insignificant as undesirable and oppressive, and designate it as a threat to individual freedom and the common good.

The terms 'politically correct,' 'political correctness' and 'PC' (which in the course of this writing I have used interchangeably) have entered the public consciousness as popular catchwords to describe what is politically or socially 'in' or 'out' of fashion. Anything evaluated in terms of its 'PC'-ness reduces to superficial dimensions derivative of the media, as political and social issues or stances are considered solely in terms of their trendiness, marketability and audience appeal. What is significant here is not whether being politically correct is good or bad, but that 'PC' serves as a bulwark against an actual or perceived threat to social and political reality and belittles its significance.

The term 'politically correct' is frighteningly employed in a Time magazine article to expediently mark gay activists as a threat to society. The brief article, "Censors on the Street" (13 May 1991), begins:

Inside San Francisco's venerable Tosca Cafe, filming for the mystery thriller Basic Instinct, starring Michael Douglas, was proceeding smoothly. But on the street a drama of another sort was unfolding: a crowd of gay activists carried signs, shouted slogans and continued their efforts to disrupt the action. The number of arrests mounted last week as they violated a temporary restraining order to stay away. In what movie makers see as a dangerous form of politically correct censorship, the protestors are demanding that the script be changed because it depicts lesbians as murderers and contains a scene in which they claim a woman is date-raped.

The protesters shown in a photograph holding cardboard signs bearing the words "HOLLYWOOD GREED KILLS" and "STOP HATE" become 'politically correct' censors on the street, while their power to actually censor a Hollywood production is quite insignificant and pales considerably next to the media's power to, say, misrepresent and censor protesters, particularly since the mainstream media encompasses the film and news industries. Although "politically correct censorship" is mentioned in relation to "what movie makers see," Time magazine drops its veneer of objective reporting by incorporating this charge of censorship in the article's title, which looms over the photograph of the protesters. In addition, the reader cannot know for certain whether the charge of political correctness was made by the moviemakers or by a Time
Censors on the Street

magazine reporter exercising artistic license; the term is simply there without an acknowledgment of its source or a justification of its usage.

Now that the 'politically correct' has been popularized by articles on the decline of American universities, the term can be lifted from this context and applied elsewhere serving as an advertising slogan for a conservative political campaign. The so-called issue of political correctness is simulated by a fragmentary array of news depictions united by the employment of the term 'politically correct' and the pretense of being centered around an actual phenomenon, when, in fact, 'politically correct' does not name a stable, actual entity or phenomena. Due to a lack of basis in reality, many of these news depictions are, to significant degree, derivations of previous reports on the politically correct, rehashing the same stock scenarios and recycling the same hack terms. While some of the occurrences reported in articles on politically correctness do indeed deserve attention, it remains quite another matter whether these occurrences should be described in terms of 'political correctness'. The mainstream media represents the 'politically correct' as a demand for intellectual conformity enforced by name-calling and thought control, when it is the media (and not the 'thought police' of minority, gay and female students and their radical professors) which holds the formidable power to shape the thoughts and opinions of the public. Furthermore, the media adapts the very same tactics for which it chastises the 'thought police' by employing the term 'politically correct' for name-calling. In doing so, the mainstream media has provided Americans with a way to reckon with their prejudice and intolerance of difference. Faced with charges of racism and bigotry, racists and bigots can now respond with accusations of political correctness.

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Dear Citizen,

Today I am announcing my candidacy for the office of President of the United States of America.

I’ve actually been on the campaign trail since last April when I made my first public announcement in New York City and since then in a variety of places including Chicago, New Hampshire, Vermont, Colorado, New Mexico and New Jersey.

The initial impulse to run for office was spurred on by George Bush’s speech at a college graduation in Ann Arbor, Michigan last Spring. He stated that “the politically correct” are the greatest threat to freedom of speech in America today. By that he means members of ACT-UP, victims of bias crimes: women, homosexuals, ethnic and racial minorities. He would like them to shut up. As President he functions as a grand employer who has a complaint box. Each of us may get our two cents in. Once. After that we’re on our own because there is no special treatment for the vast majority of Americans today. There is very special treatment for white upper middle class heterosexual men and their spouses and children, there is such treatment for fundamentalist Christians and fetuses.

George Bush does not write his own speeches. The statements he made in Ann Arbor flowed from the pen of a new speech writer, an alumnus of the left-baiting Washington Times. The New York Times which covered the Ann Arbor event suggested that this was the beginning of the ‘92 campaign trail, for which freedom of speech would be a big issue. I thought if he’s starting now, I will too.

I am a 41-year old American, a female, a lesbian, from a working class background, a poet, performer and writer making my living pretty exclusively from those activities. I am a taxpayer. I’ve lived the majority of my adult life under the poverty level, without health care.