

Critical Discussions

Advocacy, Therapy, and Pedagogy

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Beyond Political Correctness: Toward the Inclusive University, edited by Stephen Richer and Lorna Weir; 272 pp. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, \$55.00 cloth, \$19.95 paper.

Anyone who would doubt the relevance of philosophy to public affairs ought to attend to the unhappy evolution of the Canadian university. On campuses across the country in recent years, speech codes have been introduced, the "re-education" of professors urged, visiting speakers on controversial subjects silenced, and classes monitored by administrators eager to do the bidding of various special interest groups. As universities have come more and more to see their role as that of some sort of multipurpose social project, education itself has become less pressing a priority. Thus, while money is found to hire sexual harassment officers, employment equity advisors and "wellness" mavens, academic posts disappear. Those that remain are frequently filled in accordance with crass gender and race-based quotas, and when that fails to guarantee positions for members of bureaucratically favored groups, contrived "schools" and pseudodisciplines proliferate. Many of these developments, however, are simply the manifestation of trickle-down deconstruction, trickle-down Rortyism, trickle-down "politics of difference," of the sort that Charles Taylor is prone to rhapsodize. Notions of value, nature and merit, of equality, universality and objectivity are dismissed as mere inventions, "imperial" notions designed to favor the powerful and oppress the disenfranchised. The art [End Page 492] of spoken and written argument, with their ideals of detachment and discipline, are taken as evidence of a smug "androcentrism," while rationality itself is derided as a "regime" that works "to maintain patriarchal control of knowledge and knowledge production." Even the notion of evaluating students by means of essays and exams is ridiculed as scandalously "non-feminist." While past attacks on academic independence have tended to come from outside the university, Canadian academics over the past decade have slavishly accepted their own domestication. More disconcerting still has been the role of pliant university presidents, most of whom have proved eager to unburden themselves of the

inconvenience of scholarship and to indulge the cosmological musings of the radical left.

Beyond Political Correctness: Toward the Inclusive University bristles both with resentment that such criticisms should even be aired and paranoia about their motivation. According to its contributors, the challenge to political correctness--the very use of the term as an epithet--is the result of a "neo-conservative" attack that has been orchestrated in and "imported" wholesale from the United States (to morally smug Canadians, there can be no more dastardly provenance) and insinuated into public debate by a servile media. The first two articles in the collection, by Dorothy Smith and Lorna Weir respectively, pursue this very theme. Each betrays that dreary habit, particularly prevalent among social scientists, of rendering imposingly technical the most bracingly trite. For instance, Smith writes: "The textuality of public text-mediated discourse is essential to its peculiar temporal and spatial properties of ubiquity and constancy of replication across multiple and various actual situations of watching, reading, or hearing" (p. 25). Translation? The more one sees, reads or hears a view expressed, the more one tends to believe it's true. Her concern here, of course, is to establish that whoever controls the means of public debate controls its terms as well, that those means happen to be controlled by neo-conservative interests bent on retarding social progress, and that growing public disquiet about educational reform simply confirms the success of that neo-conservative strategy. But the failure of Smith's account goes far beyond the thoroughly rebarbative nature of her expression.

According to Smith, the very term, "political correctness," is shorthand for an "ideological code" that has been expressly designed by "neo-conservatives" to caricature the good works of the visionary left. An ideological code, she says, operates as a "free-floating form of control," which, once established, is "self-reproducing" (p. 27). Now, **[End Page 493]** the trouble with this picture is that it can account only for ascendant ideological codes, those that are successfully transmitted and progressively consolidated. And yet, in recent years, the ideological code of the left has to a considerable extent prevailed. The neo-conservative campaign (such as it is) is a "reaction," after all, a "backlash." What, then, accounts for the dissipating of an idea, for its evolution, its being tempered, and eventually supplanted, by another? Smith is wrong to suggest that the more one hears a view expressed, the more one is inclined to assent to it. Often, quite the opposite is true. Why might that be? The neo-conservative critique, she adds, has "caught on" (p. 31). But again, why? Could there not be something compelling about its arguments? Are not at least some of its challenges warranted? For all her moral preening, Smith is giddily paternalistic (or maternalistic): the public, clearly, cannot think for itself. It is a slave to the enameled entreaties of neo-conservative hucksters. So when it responds to the left's grand designs with suspicion or derision, it can only be because the left has been outspent by its rivals.

In an essay entitled, "Academic Freedom *Is* the Inclusive University," the trinity of Janice Drakich, Marilyn Taylor, and Jennifer Bankier insist that the "reality of personal and subjective experiences must be recognized and formally acknowledged in the academy" (p. 125). The "personal and experiential," they add, "are of equal importance

to intellectual words and ideas." Or perhaps more precisely, ideas must come to be understood, not as "separate, public and objective," but as "real, emotional, and personal" (p. 131). They lament the fact that academic freedom has been limited to intellectual matters, to the exclusion of "identities, emotions, and feelings," and trace this destructive habit to a wayward "masculinist" pedagogy (pp. 121, 125). Indeed, the assumption that academic freedom exclusively concerns the passionate precision of intellectual engagement is dangerously confused. After all, they insist, "we are talking about whole people." Education is all about self-assurance, self-esteem, and women and minorities are "profoundly vulnerable" in this regard (p. 124). But the "disembodied world of the academy" is unwelcoming precisely to the extent that it fails to take into account so distinctive an "emotionality" (p. 124). The authors abhor the "[w]hite, male, androcentric assumptions" that "underlie the practice of exclusion," but say not a word about self-exclusion, the habit of choosing poorly or simply failing to achieve (p. 122). They complain that university practices and rituals that are premised on white, middle-class, male, heterosexual, able-bodied experience [End Page 494] do not fit the experiences of others, as if education were about the matching of experiences. The historian Joseph Needham once remarked that "only the wholly other can inspire the deepest love and the profoundest desire to learn." Drakich, Taylor and Bankier blithely turn Needham on his head.

Several selections in the second half of *Beyond Political Correctness* are examples of the sort of cathartic mewling that Drakich and her co-authors champion. Such work can even be said to constitute an emerging genre, what one might call the feminist confessional. Contributions of this kind are characterized above all by their unapologetically testimonial nature, according to which, as William A. Henry has observed, what is most important "is the act of speaking, not what is being said." ¹ In such instances, Henry adds, "the voices of the previously unheard are presumed to legitimize things merely by their testimonial presence." This is a profoundly anti-intellectual and anti-rational posture, since any attempt to invoke standards, any effort to determine whether a particular view measures up, enlightens or otherwise rewards our attention, is ruled categorically out of order. One has simply to understand that this is not part of the game.

Himani Bannerji's "Re: Turning the Gaze" is a fitting, if especially embarrassing, example. Recording her impressions as a nonwhite woman educator, Bannerji nurses perceived slights, burnishing them until they become jealously-borne afflictions. The result is a display of sour self-pity and shameless self-dramatization. She describes herself in lectures as "offering up piece by piece my experience, body, intellect, so others can learn" (p. 224). As a teacher, she adds with bizarre messianism, "my body is offered up to them to learn from, the room is an arena, a stage, an amphitheater, I am an actor in a theatre of cruelty" (p. 223). Indeed, simply to choose the pedagogic path is to inflict violence upon oneself, since one invariably feels "intellectually cheated, politically negated and existentially invisible" (p. 232).

As ridiculous as Bannerji's histrionics are, however, matters get remarkably worse. "Understanding and Solidarity," by Geraldine Moriba-Meadows, a young black

woman, and Jennifer Dale Tiller, a young white woman, is presented in the form of a "creative dialogue," comprising alternating diary entries "based on the shared experience of meeting bell hooks," the black American feminist. While surely the book's intellectual low point, it is at once its high point in inadvertent hilarity.

"This is my story," Tiller declares breathlessly. **[End Page 495]**

Now was my chance. She was sitting alone. . . . I wanted her recognition of my values. . . . I was in a euphoric state; in silent tears. . . . I was excited because she was providing me with new tools to build my ideal humanity. . . . Wow, I am so excited to be invited to the dinner party held in her honor. . . . I felt shy and nervous. . . . She held my hands. . . . I felt as comfortable as a puppy by the fireplace at bell's feet. . . . I felt so much admiration. . . . I idolized her. . . . I was actively conjuring up the best words, phrases, and examples to use to express my humanitarian ideals and goals. I wanted so badly to be impressive. I wanted to impress bell." (pp. 237-41)

Moriba-Meadows, however, will have none of it. Adopting the quirky conventions of slashes, asterisks and lower-case letters (capitals, commas and periods being, one assumes, unduly oppressive), she sneers, "white people always think that they understand everything and everyone* the white people that i knew in the audience started coming up to me to get some reassurance that they were okay . . . * i wanted to gloat and tell them they should feel ashamed and guilty" (pp. 238-39).

Not even Tiller is spared Moriba-Meadows's wrath: "jennifer why don't you go away * give us a chance to rejoice in our sisterhood/ and our BLACKNESS/ amongst ourselves/ by ourselves . . . * BLACK people need space * we must stop allowing ourselves to compromise" (pp. 243-44).

Tiller feels the searing pain of rejection: "I am hurting," she writes. "I am alone" (p. 242). But then she rallies. Moriba-Meadows be damned! All that matters is winning bell's approval: "I want to do my Master's degree on anti-sexism and anti-racism," she informs us. "I want to learn how to educate individuals to value and respect diversity. I want to learn how to combat all the ism's and phobias our world thrives on. These are my goals. This is me. I wanted bell to know ME" (p. 246).

And so it goes. (Incidentally, in 1990, this exchange was granted the first Women's Studies Essay Award at the University of Western Ontario.)

Stephen Richer's "Reaching the Men: Inclusion and Exclusion in Feminist Teaching" is evidence that eagerly penitent males can also master the art of the feminist confessional. Richer agonizes over his childhood "exclusion from peer play," his "awkward adolescence" ("I still remember the taunts . . .") and concludes that it was no accident that he ended up in sociology, "a discipline in which championing the underdog seemed a fundamental premise" (pp. 195, 197, 213). He declares himself a "radical pedagogue," by which he appears to mean, **[End Page 496]** not only that he is a committed reformer, but a cheerful remedialist as well (p. 200). Richer conceives his

task above all as that of "correcting silences," of contriving alternate means to appeal to the uninterested and credit the threadbare offerings of the ill-prepared (p. 197). Thus, enlightened pedagogy involves "revealing yourself as a whole person," "gathering data on students' feelings" and creatively overhauling one's course requirements (pp. 197, 198). Illiteracy and muddle are trifling slurs, he suggests, the notions of order, clarity and authority oppressive. Accordingly, new forms of student performance ought to be devised, "forms such as the journal and the life history, both of which give validity to personal experience [unassailable testimony] and to writing as process rather than product [the mere act of doing as opposed to the calibre of what is done]" (p. 205).

This vacuous therapeutics is consistent with a tendency of the book's contributors to dismiss the notions of quality and merit as merely ideologically-inspired. Since the enforcing of standards invariably results in certain people losing out, it is only right, they contend, to reject those standards. Thus, Drakich, Taylor, and Bankier maintain that student enrollments and academic appointments should be determined in light of the "social-relational context" of institutions, since university populations "no longer reflect the monolithic demographic of the white male academy" (p. 123). A university ought to aspire, that is, not so much to consolidating its reputation in research and instruction, but to proving itself suitably "representative" and "inclusive," current jargon for placing a higher priority on the accident of group membership than on well-earned credentials. Indeed, to judge an individual as an individual is simply to lapse into what Jo-Ann Wallace breezily derides as "radical liberalism" (p. 152). Recognition and inclusion are wonderful ideals, but even Charles Taylor acknowledges that they must be earned. ²

Various contributors deal with the common accusation that their efforts serve only to politicize the academy, cagily supplanting education with a pinched and bullying ideology. Their response, however, is simply to register the countercharge that prevailing conceptions of education are themselves deeply ideological, and less enlightened to boot. In "Diversity, Power, and Voice," the one article in the collection in which an author shows any appetite for critical reflection, Daiva K. Stasiulis realizes that this will not do. She quotes Diana Fuss, who notes that so unrestrained an extension of the terms "ideological" and **[End Page 497]** "political" ensures only that they will be "voided of any meaning or specificity at all" (p. 172). In other words, if everything were political, then nothing would be. Stasiulis expresses the suspicion that "the game-playing verbal gyrations" of postmodern progressives "are a cover for an absence of lucid analytical complexity. Such writing is most certainly not a source of empowerment for students. Obtuseness of language, and sometimes . . . playful and ironic word-plays, have substituted for analytical richness and rigour" (p. 179). When she further notes the danger in "privileging heterogeneity and fragmentation" and laments the "endless agonizing about countless numbers of constituencies that would need to be consulted in order to be inclusive," her own essay begins to assume the proportions of a neo-conservative rebuttal to her fellow contributors (p. 180). Elsewhere, however, Stasiulis earns her postmodern stripes. Academic models of argumentation and debate, together with the "hierarchical discourse" they presume, are "male," she says (p. 184). Not only are such claims notoriously self-defeating, they also

patronize, implicitly disparaging the profound analytical abilities of many women. When Stasiulis concludes with weary wisdom that each teacher "will have to navigate her own path between the shoals of closure effected by unifying discourses, and the dangers of endless, unanchored, and depoliticized 'difference,'" she merely describes in larded postmodern prose what scholars have been struggling to do for centuries (p. 186).

The entire book has an air of determined special pleading. Both Smith and Weir lament the neo-conservative habit of invoking military metaphors, although they themselves are quite content to talk about "offensives," "incursions," "deployment" and a "return to the trenches." In their introductory essay, Weir and Richer refer to how neo-conservatives drape with the mantle of academic freedom their opposition to employment equity and sexual harassment policies (p. 9). And yet, it can be alleged with no less warrant that they drape in the mantle of "human rights" their own steadfast championing of mediocrity and obvious discomfort with excellence (achievement itself being, we are told, a male construct). With what can only be mock alarm, they proceed to note that neo-conservative ideology is "explicitly constructed for media use to achieve desired political ends." It is as if they suppose that the left itself has no such ends, or at least does not particularly care to achieve them, or at the very least would scarcely deign to influence public opinion in any but the most apologetically suggestive way. Victor Shea bemoans the neo-conservative "reduction of complex intellectual positions to simple oppositions," its dependence [End Page 498] on "either/or arguments," as well as "hyperbole and demonization" (p. 99). *Beyond Political Correctness*, however, is a testament to the fact that the left plays by the same slippery rules. Finally, Smith remarks that, in the wake of neo-conservative casuistry, "They" take on a "virtual reality" (p. 46). That is, "political correctness" comes to have "a discursively constituted reality; it is represented as a definite movement or group" (p. 45). Of course, the effect of her own argument is to do her own bit of discursive constituting, in her case concerning colonizing swarms of "neo-conservatives."

In other words, what's sauce for the neo-conservative goose is sauce for the politically-correct gander. And though no such *tu quoque* can establish the object of its complaint as fallacious, it can certainly expose it as maddeningly hypocritical.

The book's concluding essay, by Tim McCaskell, concerns so-called anti-racist education. Although his remarks are based on his acquaintance with secondary schools in Ontario, they are clearly relevant to the current state of the Canadian university. For McCaskell, after all, education is primarily about "self-image," about the exercising of students' innate ability to "deconstruct . . . the power dynamics that race, sex, sexual orientation, and so on, weave through their lives" (pp. 264, 266). Schools, that is, are fundamentally, if not political battlegrounds, then at least social Petri dishes, where oppressive orthodoxies are to be "interrogated" and the students' habit of self-assertion and sense of unfocused grievance encouraged. Conveniently for McCaskell, of course, it is not he who has to pay the cost of his own crusading. That falls instead to young Canadians, far too many of whom arrive at university incapable of thought, hostile to learning, and resentful of intellectual discipline. Ignorant of what a verb is or of what

constitutes an argument, or even a sentence, they are defeated before Christmas, outperformed by refugees from all corners of the globe who, six months earlier, couldn't speak a word of English.

That a book as shabby and juvenile as *Beyond Political Correctness* could even be published, particularly by an otherwise respected university press, is an indication of how far the rot has spread. And yet, though its contributors are avowedly of the left, it hardly follows that blame for the current malaise rests with them alone. In a fine book entitled, *Bankrupt Education: The Decline of Liberal Education in Canada*, Peter C. Emberley and Waller R. Newell provide a far more judicious assessment.³ The greatest threat to education in Canada, they suggest, comes not just from tenured ninnyes on the left, but from the crude instrumentalism [End Page 499] of those who view the university on the corporate model. However strange these two camps may be to one another, they nonetheless share the fundamental conviction that there is no human soul, nor any such thing as a value that transcends politics or the marketplace, and that, even if there were, education has precious little to do with either. Whereas the one is bent on producing touchy, politicized half-wits, the other is content to process simpering, if eminently employable, conformists. Thus do Canadian universities plod on, slouching doggedly toward what Robertson Davies, with his home and native land very much in mind, once grumpily denounced as "the infernal minimum."

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Notes

[1.](#) William A. Henry III, *In Defense of Elitism* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994), p. 67.

[2.](#) Charles Taylor, "The Politics of Recognition," in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition*, ed. Amy Gutman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 34-35, 66-71.

[3.](#) Peter C. Emberley and Waller R. Newell, *Bankrupt Education: The Decline of Liberal Education in Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).