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REVIEW OF BOOKS

A Journal of Political Thought and Statesmanship

CONSTITUTIONAL POLITICS

IDENTITY POLITICS

Patriotism vs. Multiculturalism

by
Thomas D. Klingenstein

with responses from

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Socialism for Dummies

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Andrew Roberts's Churchill

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The P.C. Menace

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THE MENACE OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS



POLITICAL CORRECTNESS STARTED OUT as a minor project of the international firm known as the Good Intentions Paving Company. What, after all, could be better intended than insisting that denigrating ethnic names (“polak,” “kike,” “spic,” “wop,” and worse) and language debasing women be debarred from public discourse and put out of bounds in civilized private conversation? Nothing, surely. But political correctness soon came to be about much more than social decorum. As with so many projects of the Good Intentions Paving Company, things haven’t worked out quite as planned.

Lashed up as it soon became with the campaign for a misguided equalizing in all American institutions, political correctness took a large leap forward in its ambitions. Criticism of any action or attempt to bring equality soon became, *ipso facto*, politically incorrect. Affirmative action—the rigging of admissions requirements at the country’s most prestigious universities in favor of what were deemed oppressed minority groups—was an early gambit in the campaign for equal outcomes and a boost, too, for political correctness. Criticizing affirmative action carried with it the penalty of being thought racist.

How could one admit minority students, it was felt, without catering to their special

interests? So an ample buffet of courses in African-American, Chicano, and other studies were offered at universities. These courses would, naturally, be taught by matching minority-group faculty. To denigrate these courses, to argue that they were largely victimology, and as such that they lowered the standard once in place for the liberal arts in higher education, would in itself of course be politically incorrect, and most people who knew better were hesitant to step forth and say so.

What became known as the women’s movement soon claimed oppressed status, since it could not claim actual minority status. Homosexuals, male and female, were next on board. Hispanic Americans surely qualified, and so others who could construe a history—or, in the cant phrase of the day, a *narrative*—of inequality forced upon them. The United States began to seem a country of victims—and victimology, the study of victimhood from the point of view of the victims, became a dominant subject in high schools and especially in the social science and humanities departments of universities.

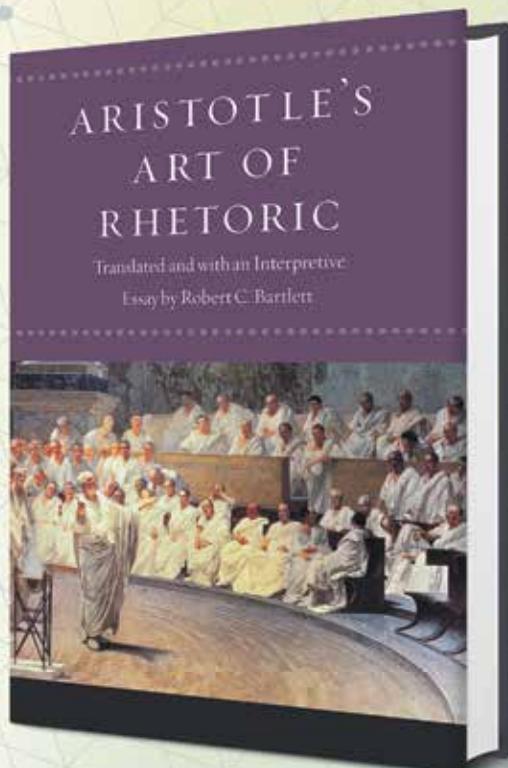
Political correctness meanwhile became the new national etiquette, at least among the self-acclaimed cognoscenti, or as they came to think of themselves, the “woke”—a word meaning those awake and responsive

to the important social and political questions and issues of the day. In universities and in public life generally one violated this etiquette at one’s peril. A violation could be as trivial as telling the wrong joke, not being sufficiently inclusive (inclusivity, like diversity, would soon become one of the P.C. shibboleths) in one’s speech or writing, or being insensitive about observing the new dispensation on proper pronoun usage. Textbooks, commercials, newspapers, and television responded to the campaign for political correctness by giving equal time and space to all victim groups in their coverage—equal not to their demographic numbers but to what had long been thought the dominant white middle-class population in the country.

Check Your Privilege

WITH POLITICAL CORRECTNESS IN place, one had to handle all social exchanges, all conversation, carefully, warily. A lawyer I know not long ago told me that, because a number of the people in his firm were retiring, he decided to look into acquiring room for his practice in the offices of a larger firm. Everything was in place, the deal was all but set, when a senior member of the larger firm suggested he meet for lunch with some of the firm’s younger associates,

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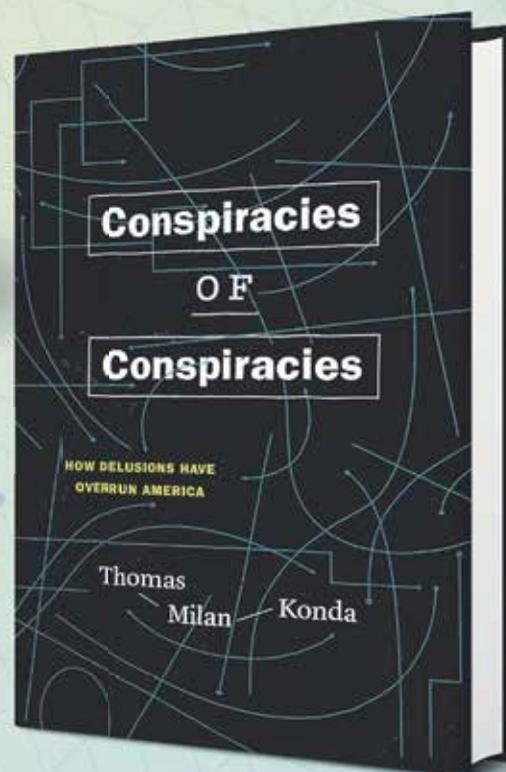
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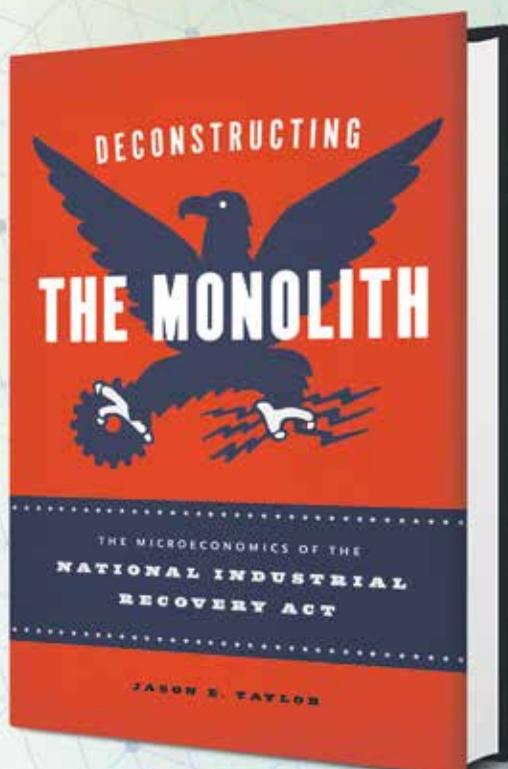
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who would be working with him. A week or so after his having met with them, he received a phone call from that same senior member of the firm informing him that, as it turned out, there really wasn't room for him in the larger firm after all. Strange, or so it seemed to him, until, roughly six months later, he learned that the young associates of the larger firm didn't want to work with him, and this for two reasons: at the lunch he told a joke about a fat man and he referred to a few of the secretaries and administrative assistants who worked for him as "girls." That killed the deal. That he was good to the women he called "girls," and they loyal to him over many years, didn't matter. The joke and the word "girls" disqualified him, made him instantly and irredeemably *non grata*.

When it first got underway, there was a note of comedy about the demands of the politically correct to regulate language, with a number of traditional words declared officially *verboten*. "Mankind" was ruled out and replaced by "humankind." "Man" in its traditional use as a suffix to "chairman" and other nouns was no longer allowed. (I recall round this time referring to a woman I knew who had a voracious appetite as a "real trencherperson," and getting a small laugh. No longer funny, McGee, or so I suppose.) "Negro," once a term of great dignity, and the word of choice for Martin Luther King, Jr., Roy Wilkins, Sr., and Whitney Young, was now thought reactionary and racist. "Oriental" was also off the books, and "Orientalism," the title of a popular leftwing academic book by Edward Said, was now understood to be a word harking back to the bad old days of European imperialism. Pronouns needed to be fine-combed in both speech and writing, so that no "he" might appear without an accompanying "she," no "him" without a "her." With the political correctness police monitoring language, a loose lip could sink your ship.

Under political correctness the First Amendment calling for free speech somehow didn't apply, for lots of speech was now clearly out of bounds and entire subjects disallowed. Nor did political correctness have anything like a statute of limitations. One could be held responsible, and thereby punished, for what were deemed violations of the political correctness code committed half a century ago and longer—well before there was such a code. Aided by the internet's social media, the surveillance exerted by political correctness became total, the impulse of political correctness itself totalitarian.

Today, political correctness and the privileging of putative victim groups march along

in happy tandem. Under this arrangement any perceived inequality is in itself politically incorrect. A recent case at Yale University nicely underscores how this works. Three undergraduate women there have entered a lawsuit contending that off-campus fraternities at the school should be made illegal. In their lawsuit they claim that not only were they sexually harassed while attending fraternity parties but that the fraternities, through their power of social connections with men who had earlier been members, give current fraternity members an unfair advantage in the hunt for superior jobs once undergraduate education is completed. Clearly, so the lawsuit presumes, such inequality cannot be allowed to persist. As for the sexual harassment portion of the lawsuit, one might have thought the remedy was obviously at hand: women should stay away from those fraternity parties. As for unfair advantage, the three young women themselves already have an unfair advantage over hundreds of thousands of their contemporaries by the mere fact of their having got into Yale. Perhaps someone should

When I talk with candor about these subjects with friends, I ask if they are wearing a wire.

come along and sue these three women and Yale itself merely for existing.

On the Attack

IF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS HAD STOPPED at the request for civil behavior, there would have been no difficulty in acceding to it. If homosexual men wish to be called "gay," if blacks wish to be called "African-American," if women prefer "Ms." over "Mrs." and "Miss," there would be no problem whatsoever. But the program inherent in political correctness has evolved into something much more ambitious than that. In its current phase, it is revolutionary, seeking a utopia of complete fairness in all institutions—educational, cultural, political—which in its advocates' interpretation means utter equality for all, excluding only those who violate political correctness's underlying assumptions and well-known restrictions.

Political correctness attacks all that it finds discriminatory in public and social life. Any

perceived discrimination against women, African Americans, or other victim groups is no longer to be tolerated. Nor, of course, should it be, but under the attack of political correctness more than mere discrimination is under attack. The least perceived differences between individuals and groups, whether inherent or acquired through upbringing, are for now to be ignored in order that they may ultimately be eradicated. Political correctness doesn't allow leeway for differences in intelligence, talent, or strength. Not equal opportunities but equal outcomes are its monomaniacal goal, and it is not overly concerned about the punishing means required to achieve it.

Under political correctness, righteous indignation and tender sensibilities must be protected. Hence the politically correct have no compunction in removing statues of figures from the Confederacy from their long inhabited public places. Nor must the young be put to undue stress in the classroom. So trigger warnings have been installed in universities alerting students to courses that may contain material painful to them. If minority students wished to remain exclusively among themselves—thus all but killing the once grand ideal of integration in American life—this, too, could be arranged by setting up separate dormitories and dining rooms, clubs and extracurricular activities for their use. A tenet of political correctness is that students must above all feel *safe*.

Along with rewriting the past and protecting the young from the harsh realities of life, the political correctness program emphasizes diversity, which has become one of the great desiderata of the contemporary university, itself the hearth and home of political correctness. You will nowadays rarely see an official photograph of a university president unaccompanied by a rich mix of ethnically diverse—African-American, Asian, East-Indian, American-Indian (all right, Native American)—students. Admissions offices are instructed to accept fixed percentages of incoming students on the bases of race, national origin, and gender, replacing the old quotas once in place against Jews, Catholics, and blacks. Provosts and deans are hired to ensure this diversity is enacted. Schools without such staff or without the right ethnic mix are in danger of having federal funds denied them, for by now, such has been the spread of political correctness through the culture, that the federal bureaucracy is in on the game.

In the contest for scholarships, prizes, and honorary awards, political correctness holds the cards, and deals from an unapologetically stacked deck. A good gauge of this is the list of any recent year's honorary degrees be-



stowed by universities. The roster of recipients is sure to include at least one African American and more than one woman. Not to do so is to risk being called racist, misogynist, and to have one's school judged egregiously behind the times. White male commencement speakers, no matter how impressive their scientific, artistic, or scholarly accomplishments, are rarer than honest politicians. Under the reign of political correctness, all other things being equal, which they rarely are, African Americans, women, and other presumably oppressed minority group members are naturally chosen over drab white males for professorships, administrative posts, scholarships, and other university appointments.

As for literary prizes, from the Nobel Prize on down, juries for such awards now feel that the time has come to give their prizes to women, or African Americans, or poets from Greenland, for one rarely any longer has the sense that the truly best writers are being honored. I once remarked in print, in the *Times Literary Supplement*, that the Pulitzer Prize usually goes to one of two types: those who don't need it and those who don't deserve it. When some years ago Katharine Graham won the Pulitzer Prize for her rather weepy poor-little-rich-girl autobiography, the critic Hilton Kramer remarked that she was awarded it on both grounds. The idea behind giving prizes, awards, honorary degrees on the basis of political correctness is that past injustices are, at least partially, being made up for and justice is thereby being done.

Substandard

THE UNIVERSITY HAS LONG BEEN THE institution where utopias go to die. After World War I, socialism's chief home was the university. (Dig round a university's History or an English Department today and you might still discover a Marxist napping in his office.) Of course the youth rebellion of the 1960s found its home in the university. All these may now seem passing fancies, but political correctness figures to have a longer, and more significant, life than any of them, for it has affected not merely the institution of the university but the wider culture of the country.

The goal of political correctness is to level American culture, to reduce the role of elite culture, slowly eliminating merit and intellectual authority as the main standards in the country's culture. If one were to argue that the result of applying the criteria of political correctness is a general dumbing down of learning, or choosing to value artistic productions on a political rather than an aesthetic basis, an

advocate of political correctness would likely respond that this isn't necessarily true, but even if it were, it would be worth it. A great flattening equality is the goal of political correctness. This is what makes it revolutionary.

What's in it for the more strident advocates, or at least for those who are not themselves members of victim groups? Nothing so mercenary as profit, nor so obvious as direct power, but something perhaps grander than money or power—the assurance of their own splendid virtue. The role of virtue in politics or any social movement ought never to be underestimated. Outside the corridors of power, the feeling of righteousness, both on the Left and on the Right, is behind much political sentiment. The word “virtucrat” describes those whose sense of themselves is motivated by the feeling of their own superior public morality. Those who subscribe wholeheartedly to political correctness, especially those who have no direct stake in the game, do so because they feel doing so is right and just—and expressing these feelings makes them feel damned fine about themselves.

What they may not realize is the deep cultural implications of political correctness. The *New York Times Book Review*, the *New York Review of Books*, and the *London Review of Books* currently review an overwhelming number of novels by women and African-American writers. In recent years much of the fiction published by the *New Yorker* also seems to be by women or by Asian writers. By publishing him extensively in its pages the *Atlantic* has made a prominent figure of the writer Ta-Nehisi Coates, whose writings—asking for reparations for slavery days, worrying about his young son's growing up in what he assumes to be an obviously and thoroughly racist country—are heavy contributions to the victimology of our time. The market for writing of this kind, by turns angry and sad, appealing above all to the guilt of its readers, is there, one imagines, because it makes those who publish it feel they are on the side of social justice, decency, righteousness—and thereby feel good about themselves. Virtue rides high again.

Consider the movies. Roughly half the movies up for Oscars this past year were, essentially, political correctness movies. The only one I saw, *Roma*, which has been widely praised, is noteworthy as an example of the P.C. movie genre. About a Mexican woman, working half as a maid, half as a nanny, for an upper-middle-class Mexican family, it is unrelenting in its dark sadness. Starkly filmed in black and white, *Roma* introduces us to the dinginess of the poor woman's days. She works in the kitchen, she does vast loads of laundry,

she cleans up dog-droppings, she tends to the younger children. She has a love affair with a young man who deserts her when she informs him she is pregnant with his child. When she gives birth, it is to a stillborn child. Evidence that some of the children in the household where she works love her is provided, and toward the close of the movie she saves one of them from drowning.

But nothing changes, and at the movie's end we see her mounting a lengthy outdoor staircase on her way to do yet another load of laundry—unending dreary toil her permanent lot for life. *Roma* describes a scene and situation of sheer depression. Why, then, do so many people seem to like it? Under the realm of political correctness, the definition of a feel-good movie has become a feel-bad movie. What in the end feels so good about *Roma* is it allows people who admire it to wallow in their own sensitivity—to feel for the hopeless life of this poor woman and yet not have to do a thing about her wretched condition. Political correctness comes at no direct cost to those who endorse it. The cost is ultimately to the culture, which in so many ways is sadly diminished.

Choosing Up Sides

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS MESHES nicely, too, with the phenomenon known as identity politics, which has dominated the Democratic Party in recent decades. Identity politics entails groupings of people—chiefly minorities—by their victim status, whether race, sex, sexual orientation, or religion. Behind identity politics is the demand for equal rights, always with the supposition that they do not already exist and the added presumption that no progress toward this goal has genuinely been made, so that it is assumed that vast numbers of whites stand implacably opposed to black equality and men to equality for women, while homophobes are everywhere blocking acceptance for gays, and on and on. Under identity politics, sides are chosen up as in a sandlot baseball game: Victims versus Victimizers, the Woke versus the Deplorables. No one has to be told on whose side in this game virtue lies.

Political correctness meanwhile makes it impossible to tell the truth about any aspect of identity politics without being thought crude, insensitive, or downright villainous. One cannot say without being thought a homophobe that no one really knows the origin of homosexuality and that the homosexual life can be hard. One cannot counter the Black Lives Matter movement (without being thought a racist) by saying that black lives do indeed matter, which is all the more reason it



is a greater tragedy that in the city of Chicago thousands of black gang members have killed other blacks while in recent years there have been vastly fewer police killings of black men and women throughout the country. Nor is one able to suggest without being thought misogynist that men do some things better than women as women do some things better than men. (When I talk with candor about any of these subjects with friends, I generally ask, jokingly, if they are wearing a wire.) Political correctness has made conversation on any of these and many other subjects all but impossible, and in doing so has added substantially to, if not caused, resentment, anger, and divisiveness across the land.

As for humor, while one might have thought political correctness itself supplies an ample target, comedians have tended to shy away from it, lest they, too, be put out of business by public censure. Under the reign of political correctness, one is allowed not a single mistake. One thinks of Michael Richards, so amusing as the character Kramer in *Seinfeld*, now disqualified owing to a joust with a heckler at a comedy club in 2006 in which he used a word second only to the c-word on our contemporary P.C. Inquisition's index of forbidden language. One of the hallmarks of the politically correct, of course, is a grave and abiding humorlessness.

The role of political correctness in politics has also greatly expanded. If in his political career a politician cooperated with now dead senators known to be racist—as has been the case of Joe Biden with Strom Thurmond—that is a mark in the wrong column against him. If there is anything politically incorrect in a politician's background that can be used against him, as has Virginia Governor Ralph

Northam's photograph in his medical-school yearbook, events are likely to conspire to make sure it will be so used. Although being a Democrat has saved Biden and Northam (for now), political correctness in politics is not merely a tool of the Left. In the case of Northam's now notorious blackface-Klansman photo, it was revealed, in the hope of sinking his career, which it probably has, by a conservative blog in response to Northam's radical views on late-term birth control. The hearings over the Supreme Court candidacy of Brett Kavanaugh were little more than trial by political correctness. Of late it has been said that the Democratic Party, owing to political correctness, probably cannot run a white male for president in 2020. Look for lots more of these attempts at the destruction of political careers by way of political correctness in the years ahead.

A Sense of Mission

IS POLITICAL CORRECTNESS AS INDEFENSIBLE as I have made it seem? Has it become primarily the weapon I believe it now is? Have its inroads on education been as deleterious as I have described? Has it diminished the culture to the extent I have suggested? Will it come to play a greater and drearier role in our politics? Is its impulse as totalitarian as I argue? Why, finally, can't political correctness live in harmony with excellence in all realms of art and thought, and return to its modest yet useful goal of simple decency in the treatment of all people?

I suspect it can't, or at any rate won't, because its success thus far in disrupting society's traditional arrangements of rewarding merit and promoting achievement can only

encourage it to go still further in its disruptions. Political correctness has filled its adherents with a sense of mission, an enthusiastic drive to improve society. (In his *Dictionary*, Samuel Johnson defined enthusiasm as "a vain belief of private revelation, a vain confidence of divine favour.") This sense of mission affords them that glowing feeling of righteousness available only to those with the strong feeling that virtue is on their side, and encourages them to persist. The utopia of political correctness, the virtuous world of absolute equality, cannot seem to the politically correct all that far off. Nothing is likely to stop them now. Certainly not the admonitory couplet about utopias, written, Michael Oakeshott in his essay "The Tower of Babel" claims, by a Babelian poet of the time:

Those who in fields Elysian would dwell
Do but extend the boundaries of hell.

What, as the Russian revolutionary democrat Nikolai Chernyshevsky long ago asked, is to be done? Probably not much. One can only hope that political correctness will go so far as to make evident its absurdity, as Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's Green New Deal has made alarmist environmentalism seem absurd. Until then there is nothing to do but to wait things out, in the hope that the deep illogic of political correctness and its widespread perniciousness, like that of Prohibition and other programs of enforced virtue that have gone before, will indubitably reveal itself for the grievous mistake it is.

Joseph Epstein is an essayist, short story writer, and the author, most recently, of Charm: The Elusive Enchantment (Lyons Press).

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