Teaching in the Age of "Political Correctness"

by Henry A. Giroux

Pressure groups from the right demand a political correctness of their own, but somehow the name p.c. is never applied to them.

—Eric Foner (in Elson 1994, 64)

For many conservatives, public schooling and higher education in the United States have fallen prey to an adversarial culture that is touted as being at odds with traditional conceptions of citizenship, national identity, and history. Invoking the language of patriotism, conservatives argue that schools are increasingly undermining the very foundation of what it means to be a U.S. citizen. Taken up under what has been criticized as the "tyranny of the politically correct," the terms of the debate about educational reform and teaching have been largely defined by deep-seated conservatism initiated during the Reagan and Bush administrations.

The debate over "political correctness" has been largely waged through the media and the popular press, and students and teachers often have limited access to the full range of issues associated with the debate. If educators and students are to make sense of the political correctness debate in terms of the implications it has for analyzing the relationship between knowledge and authority, between teaching and student learning, it will be necessary to analyze what is often left out of the discussion. This means having access to arguments that inform this debate from a critical, progressive perspective. More specifically, it means providing educators and students with at least two critical modes of inquiry. First, educators and students need a critical perspective on the anti–political correctness view of teaching, knowledge, and standards. Second, they need access to elements of a critical pedagogy that challenges and poses alternatives to the ideological and pedagogical assumptions that inform the attack on academics whose classroom practices are often summarily dismissed as merely a species of political correctness.

The Tyranny of the Politically Correct?

On May 4, 1990, President George Bush, while delivering a commencement address at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, raised the issue of political correctness. He argued that, while political correctness "arises from the laudable desire to sweep away the debris of racism and sexism and hatred," it has led to intolerance and has "declare[d] certain topics off-limits" (in Cockburn 1991, 30). Provided with a presidential imprimatur, political correctness erupted in cover stories in major popular magazines such as *Newsweek*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *New York*. Sustained accounts of this new movement were given full-scale editorial and journalistic treatment in *Time*, *The New York Times*, and *The Wall Street Journal*. At the heart of this coverage and popular fanfare is Fraser's (1991, 6) argument that:

> *The academy is under siege by leftists, multiculturalists, deconstructionists and other radicals who are politicizing the university and threatening to undermine the very foundations of the Western intellectual tradition. . . . Armed with affirmative action admissions and hiring, as well as new French literary theories, the politically correct hope to transform the university into a den of multiculturalism—silencing everyone who would dare dissent by calling them "sexist," "racist" or "antideconstructionist."*

For many conservatives, including Patrick Buchanan, Irving Kristol, and, more recently, Rush Limbaugh, the assault on political correctness indicates an important political transition necessitated by the breakup of the Soviet Union and the "winning" of the Cold War by the United States. No longer unified in their fight against the external threat of communism, conservatives now point to the tyranny of the politically correct as an ideological rallying cry to ward off the cultural threat posed by the "enemy within."

As the battle lines of higher and public education are redrawn around U.S. culture and national identity, conservatives have pointed to the political danger posed by multicultural curricula currently employed in many public schools. Moreover, they claim that a generation of young "radical" academics has emerged, challenging the racial and gender admissions policies of the universities and highlighting exclusions and biases built into the academic canon taught through the disciplines in higher education. Rather than being greeted as an insight into the workings of higher education, neoconservatives view such criticism as both a species of anti-U.S. sentiment and a threat to Western civilization. University of California at Los Angeles public policy professor James Q. Wilson (in Diamond 1993, 32) captured this opinion by arguing that "the university has always had leftists but never before like the ones we have now. These new leftists rebel against reason, not just against institutions."

For progressives, such a claim exemplifies less the evils of political correctness than a right-wing version of academic correctness. For example, Richard Hamilton's (1993) analysis of research on the political orientation of faculty in higher education indicates that, between the years 1969–8 the great majority of faculty defined themselves as either liberals or conservative. Similarly, Rosa Ehrenreich (1993, 33) refuted the charge that radicals have taken over higher education:

> *A national survey of college administrators released last summer found that "political correctness" is not the campus issue it has been portrayed to be by pundits and politicians of the political right. During the 1990–91 academic year, according to the survey's findings, faculty members complained of pressure from students and fellow*

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> *professors to alter the political and cultural content of their courses at only 5 percent of all colleges. So much for the influence of the radicals, tenured or otherwise.*

But neither the empirical evidence nor the charges of gross exaggeration lodged by progressives have deterred conservatives and liberals from strongly arguing that political correctness poses a serious threat to Western culture and its educational institutions. This issue becomes evident in conservatives' rhetoric about declining standards to give credence to the claim that politics are undermining the intellectual culture of higher education.

The Politics of Standards

Speaking at a 1992 symposium on political correctness, President of the National Association of Scholars Stephen Balch argued that:

> *The debate about political correctness . . . is actually a debate not about politics but about appropriate intellectual standards and appropriate academic ethics. . . . What is at issue here is to convey a sufficient knowledge base because without knowledge we can't think.* (in American Council on Education 1992, 5)

For Balch, as for many other conservatives waging a battle against political correctness, the issue of standards has become one of the key concerns facing public and higher education in the 1990s. Three major considerations frame this issue.

First, a resolute defense of the traditional curriculum serves to guard against the contamination that threatens the canon by "other" knowledge. In this perspective, the knowledge that shapes the canon of higher education and the curriculum of the public school is defended largely through rhetorical and poetic appeals to the timeless values of reason, truth, and beauty. Second, an insistence on "excellence" removed from the issues of equity and power points to the purity and alleged objectivity of academic pursuits. Here excellence is legitimized on the assumption that knowledge accumulated through the selective process of a tradition represents the best that can be offered through the evolution of Western culture within the intellectual grasp of an elite few. Third, the defining principle of traditional pedagogical practice is the transmission of bodies of knowledge from one generation to the next. The emphasis, crucially, is on processing received knowledge, rather than transforming it in the interest of social growth or change.

According to conservatives such as Balch, the integrity of the university and public schooling is at risk because academic standards have been compromised through such programs as affirmative action, open admissions policies, and the inclusion of nontraditional writers in the curriculum. The alleged consequence, as Allan Bloom (1987) pointed out in *The Closing of the American Mind*, is the undermining of not only the tradition of the "great books," but of existing standards of discipline and rigor, as well. Standards in this discourse are pitted against the threat posed by subordinate groups such as African-Americans, feminists, Latinos, gays and lesbians, and others who take issue with the content and form of the traditional curriculum.

Conservatives such as Dinesh D'Souza (1991), Roger Kimball (1990), and John Searle (1990) scorn the attempts of such groups to contest the claims to historical certainty and authority made on behalf of the traditional curriculum. Believing that the traditional curriculum should only change "in response to advances in knowledge and intellectual skills, and not at the behest of political imperatives or in response to every shift of intellectual fashion" (Short

1993, 92), conservatives routinely dismiss as political cant any critical inquiries regarding the relationship between institutional interests and power and what counts as "literature," "history," and "knowledge" in the curriculum (Aronowitz and Giroux 1993). For example, many subordinate groups argue that the act of knowing is integrally related to the power of self-definition, which, in part, necessitates that more diverse histories and narratives be included in the curriculum. For many conservatives, however, such inclusiveness represents both a call to politicize the curriculum and a social practice that promotes national disunity and cultural decay.

There is more at stake for conservatives than protecting the content of traditional education. There is also the threat of standards being "lowered" by admitting students formerly excluded from higher education. For instance, Jeffrey Hart (in Diamond 1993, 32), an opponent of political correctness, argued that "the broadening of the student body has led to a corruption of the curriculum." From this perspective, ideological differences are not the only threat posed by political correctness. By virtue of their very presence, cultural, racial, gender, and class differences are also marked as forms of subversion. These differences are viewed as a threat to the middle-class, European-American cultural capital that characterizes those who wield the power to secure the authority of the canon and enforce its claims to specific views of history, teaching, and learning. Adopting a generally defensive posture, conservatives respond to critiques of the canon with a crusade to safeguard the traditional curriculum from what is viewed as a hostile appropriation. In an effort to protect the canon from being watered down, conservatives often cite attempts of various colleges to replace Shakespeare and Rabelais with contemporary novelists such as James Baldwin and Toni Morrison (D'Souza 1991).

Paradoxically, the conservative position on academic "standards" generally ignores the effects of the universities' bottom-line crisis and, hence, offers meager acknowledgment—not to mention resistance—to the severe budget cuts in higher education that have resulted in the elimination of entire academic departments, the raising of tuition, the firing of both nontenured and tenured faculty, and the downsizing of university services. The result has been a growing demoralization among faculty forced to teach larger classes and assume greater workloads, as well as among the disillusioned working-class white and minority student body forced to pay higher tuition and bear the burden of reduced financial aid. In addition, such cuts open the university to funding by private foundations and corporations who will support "only those programs deemed economically correct" (Diamond 1993, 33). It is precisely the refusal to deal with such issues—and their effects upon teaching and learning—that betrays conservatives' obsession with the lowering of standards.

Academic Freedom and the Issue of Politics

Even more controversial than the issue of academic standards is the widespread perception that the public schools and universities are being increasingly politicized, and that one casualty of this process is academic freedom. Anti–politically correct conservatives believe that the politicization of the discourse of schooling and higher education is evident on a number of fronts. First, it can be observed in the efforts of radical intellectuals to use the public space of the university to address issues of race, class, and gender. It is alleged that, by challenging the university as a font of neutral scholarship, radical educators have compromised the integrity and moral

purpose of higher education. Rather than being linked to the search for truth and pure knowledge, the university, in this perspective, becomes merely a breeding ground for social transformation or what John Taylor (1993) called "the new fundamentalism." One response to the perils of political correctness that exemplifies this position can be seen in Boston University President John Silber's report of April 15, 1993, to the board of trustees. Silber (in Raskin 1994, 69) proclaimed:

> *This University has remained unapologetically dedicated to the search for truth and highly resistant to political correctness.... We have resisted the fad toward critical legal studies.... In the English Department and the departments of literature, we have not allowed the structuralists or the deconstructionists to take over. We have refused to take on dance therapy.... We have resisted revisionist history.... In the Philosophy Department we have resisted the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory.... We have resisted the official dogmas of radical feminism. We have done the same thing with regard to gay and lesbian liberation, and animal liberation.... We have resisted the fad of Afro-centrism. We have not fallen into the clutch of the multi-culturalists.*

The defensive quality of Silber's engagement with political correctness suggests a disturbing ideological orthodoxy at work in his pursuit of the truth. Ironically, Silber's statement might be interpreted to imply that the threat to academic freedom comes less from left-wing professors than it does from administrators who are willing to police and censor knowledge that challenges the traditional academic canon.

Many conservatives believe that radical academics have no grounds for distinguishing between the literary and the nonliterary since they vacate the grounds of universal truth by arguing that knowledge is mediated historically, linguistically, and socially. Nor can they distinguish works that embody high aesthetic qualities and noble ideals from those everyday cultural texts that pass the political litmus test regarding race, class, and gender. William Kerrigan (1993, 167) echoed this sentiment in arguing that those critics who claim that the dominant curriculum is racist or exclusionary can be dismissed as simply "liberal educators [who] have become pathologically sensitive to complaints of ethnocentrism." Ironically, Kerrigan (1993, 166–67) reinforced such a charge by declaring that "black and Hispanic students must be taught the language of the British and American intelligentsia, since integration will never succeed on any other terms."

Finally, one of the most visible rallying cries against political correctness comes from conservatives who link the expression of progressive ideas about gender, race, and power to forms of censorship. Citing excessive strains of anti–civil libertarianism among targeted antiracist and antisexist groups, some conservatives argue that both the discourse and the practices of such groups stifle traditional convictions and silence mainstream faculty and students. The result is an alleged marriage between intimidation and intellectual conformity. Camille Paglia, the author of *Sexual Personae*, went so far as to suggest that politically correct faculty and students constitute a "fascism of the left" and bear strong resemblance to "the Hitler Youth" (in Taylor 1993, 19). Robert Rozenzweig, President of the Association of American Universities, argued that the language of social criticism, whether it be antiracist, antisexist, or antihomophobic closes down debate by simply "bludgeoning the opposition into submission" (in American Council on Education 1992, 8). These charges betray more than an exaggerated fear. They also point

to a contradiction on the part of conservatives who associate first-amendment violations with progressive faculty and students and, at the same time—targeting women, gays, and people of color—remain indifferent to the alarming increase in hate crimes on U.S. campuses. Within this critique, conservatives mobilize populist fears of violence while keeping the social order off the agenda for either criticism or change.

For the anti–politically correct conservatives, tradition dictates what is taught in schools.

Moreover, according to anti–politically correct professors, evidence of the assault on free speech can be found in the emergence of hate-speech codes at U.S. universities. Some conservatives claim that these laws are a threat to free speech and suggest that students who engage in hostile racial slander, for example, be immune from disciplinary action under first-amendment rights. Racism in this case is seen as less corrosive to democracy than the abrogation of the legal right of its advocates to translate their prejudices into speech acts.

Even more contentious are conservatives' arguments about academic freedom and its relationship to particular teaching practices. Many liberals and conservatives argue that any form of pedagogy that takes as its goal the progressive transformation of either the classroom or society at large by definition engages in a form of pedagogical indoctrination. Teachers who take a position of advocacy, who link knowledge to democratic commitment, or who incorporate social issues into their classrooms are criticized for indoctrinating their students. Teachers who model leadership and civic courage in this view simply silence students who are allegedly refused the right to express opinions at odds with those of the teacher. However, it is precisely teachers with progressive visions who recognize the necessity for struggle and debate in the classroom as against those who advocate the transmission of orthodox world views.

Conversely, some conservatives reject the notion that teaching is a political and cultural practice that encourages critical debate and radical disagreement. In its place they advocate the promotion of pedagogical practices free of controversy and the clash of opinions.

What follows is an analysis of the potential for redefining the purpose of education, the roles and interaction between teachers and students, and pedagogy itself as part of a wider effort to expand, deepen, and reconstruct the possibility for democratic public life.

Politics and Education

At odds with the anti–politically correct conservatives is the long-standing assumption in the United States that the meaning and purpose of schooling is inherently political and democratic. This suggests that schools cannot be understood outside of the mediations of history, power, and struggle. Schools are both sense-making and power-bearing institutions that are actively involved in "the struggle to control and contribute to the social circulation and uses of meanings, knowledges, pleasures and values" (Fiske 1994, 13).

Central to any notion of education is the relationship between authority and teaching on one hand, and knowledge and power on the other. Authority is both a

condition and effect of teaching. And teaching itself is premised on making choices about the production and use of knowledge as well as helping students understand the links that mutually inform the relationship between schooling and the larger society. School as a site and teaching as a practice must always be seen as deeply moral and political. Schools, like all social sites, produce and organize knowledge through processes of inclusion and exclusion. Such processes do not exist outside of history, nor are they untouched by the operations of power. Neither the curriculum nor the canon can be understood as expressions of the disinterested search for truth and knowledge. Such knowledge, more often than not, expresses an ongoing process of negotiation and struggle among different groups over the relationship between knowledge and power, and between the construction of individual and social identity.

What counts as legitimate knowledge, culture, history, and speech can only be understood by interrogating the conditions of exclusion and inclusion in the production, distribution, circulation, and use of power and authority in the classroom. The view of knowledge as neutral and pedagogy as a transparent vehicle of truth overlooks important political issues regarding how canons are historically produced, whose interests they serve, and how they are sustained within specific forms of institutional power. Toni Morrison (1987, 8), the Nobel Prize–winning novelist, illuminated the political nature of the relationship between knowledge and power as she argued:

> *Canon building is Empire building. Canon defense is national defense. Canon debate, whatever the terrain, nature and range (of criticism, of history, of the history of knowledge, of the definition of language, the universality of aesthetic principles, the sociology of art, the humanistic imagination), is the clash of cultures. And all of the interests are vested.*

Morrison suggested that both knowledge and its dissemination are filtered through the normative lens of history and tradition, but since histories are constructed and struggled over rather then merely received and passed on to future generations, it is imperative that teachers articulate a moral vision and social ethics that provide referents for justifying how, what, and why they teach. After all, if education presupposes a vision of the future and always produces selective narratives and stories, it is crucial for teachers to both clarify and make themselves accountable for how their pedagogical practices contribute to the social consciousness, hopes, and dreams of their students.

For the anti–politically correct conservatives, tradition dictates what is taught in schools, but tradition in these terms is often tied to the obligations of reverence rather than to what might be called the imperatives of respect. Reverence suggests treating tradition as an object, an artifact that is unproblematically transmitted and received by teachers and students alike. Conversely, respect situates tradition not as a fixed object of austere contemplation, but as a cultural text that needs to be historically situated, open to debate, and central to helping students understand its limits and strengths as part of a wider attempt for them to become critical and engaging citizens.

Some conservatives would argue that such an approach to tradition vacates the terrain of values; on the contrary, it makes the very category of value problematic and, in doing so, enhances its potential for critical exchange. A critical attentiveness to the values that inform teacher work, the ways in which knowledge is constructed, and the structuring of teacher-student relationships is a precondition for making explicit and,

when necessary, changing those values that inform commonsense assumptions serving to structure oppressive conditions for students. Symbolic and material violence, whether expressed in the form of racially inspired tracking, sexist curricula, institutional inequality, authoritarian teaching, or academic insensitivity to the demands of African-Americans, women, the poor, and others cannot be challenged and transformed unless teachers become aware of how the values that sustain such practices are reproduced in the histories, institutional practices, and narratives that shape education and pedagogical practice. The issue for teachers is not to abandon judgments in the name of a false neutrality that suggests they simply be missionaries of an unproblematic truth, but to try to understand how the values that inform their work are conditioned, produced, and used to both inform their own sense of agency and its relationship to the wider issues of radical democracy.

It appears that the anti–political correctness argument against politics, along with its claim to disinterested teaching and scholarship, is really a prescription for deskilling teachers and masking how the dynamics of cultural power work in both teaching and the institutional organization of schools. The conservative ploy of labeling critical educators as "the new fundamentalists" or "cultural barbarians" may provide a rhetorical strategy for making headlines in the popular press but offers limited language for understanding how power has worked historically to silence, disable, and marginalize certain groups in society through the process of schooling. Removed from the context of history, theory, politics, and power, the discourse of anti–political correctness offers no insight into a view of educational leadership that would provide a moral focus on suffering. It offers no language for discriminating between the pedagogical and ethical imperative of challenging racism, discrimination, and social injustice and the unacceptable behavior of teachers who in their excessive zeal commit pedagogical violence by preventing students from engaging in critical and open dialogue. Moreover, the claim that social criticism promotes censorship confuses acts of state censorship with the inability of many conservatives to actually engage in critical inquiries into how power works in public schools and higher education. Anti–civil libertarian behavior is unacceptable, whether its source is a public school teacher, college professor, or antiabortion activist. But social criticism is not a liability in a vibrant democracy; it is both a political and pedagogical necessity if such a democracy is to become part of a dynamic tradition rather than a relic.

Educators should not tolerate anti–civil libertarian behavior that closes down debate and silences others, but it is no secret that the United States has a long legacy of witch hunts and show trials, and an appalling absence of public debate about crucial political issues. Institutional authorities, the U.S. government, and industry have never passionately defended the right to dissent from established and consensual policies. Therefore, the call for free speech cannot be dismissed as a convenient trope of conservative discourse parading under the banner of the anti–political correctness campaign. What teachers must address is the contradiction between the call for the defense of free speech and the simultaneous refusal to address the central and most urgent social problems of our time. The real crisis in schools may not be about censorship, freedom of speech, or the alleged evils of political correctness, but whether students are learning how to think critically, engage larger social issues, take risks, and develop a sense of social responsibility and civic courage.

Finally, this author argues, in opposition to anti–politically correct advocates, hat teachers cannot abstract the issue of tandards and excellence from a concern vith equity and social justice. These should e mutually informing categories because he discourse of standards represents part f the truth about U.S. citizens as a nation in hat it has often been evoked in order to egitimate elitism, racism, and privileges or the few, shutting down the possibilties for public schools and the academy to ducate students for critical citizenship nd the promises of a democratic society. qually important, when standards are emoved from their ethical and political eferents, they mystify how educational ractices shape what is legitimated or xcluded as knowledge and truth. Teachrs must assert their vocation as a political enterprise, without politicizing their students.

The distinction made here challenges the liberal and conservative criticism that, since critical pedagogy attempts both to politicize teaching and to teach politics, it represents a species of indoctrination. By asserting that all teaching is profoundly political and that critical educators should operate out of a project of social transformation, the argument is being made for teachers to make a distinction between what Peter Euben (1994, 14) called "political" and "politicized" education. Political education, which is central to critical pedagogy, advocates:

> *teach[ing] students how to think in ways that cultivate the capacity for judgment essential for the exercise of power and responsibility by a democratic citizenry. . . . A political, as distinct from a politicized education, would encourage students to become better citizens to challenge those with political and cultural power as well as to honor the critical traditions within the dominant culture that make such a critique possible and intelligible.*

A political education means decentering power in the classroom and other pedagogical sites so that those institutional and cultural inequalities that marginalize some groups, repress particular types of knowledge, and suppress critical dialogue can be addressed. On the other hand, a politicized education is a classroom practice in which the issue of what is taught, by whom, and under what conditions are determined by a doctrinaire political agenda that refuses to examine its own values, beliefs, and ideological construction. While refusing to recognize the social and historical character of its own claims to history, knowledge, and values, a politicized education silences students in the name of a specious universalism and denounces all transformative practices through an appeal to timeless notions of truth and beauty.

In short, the battle against political correctness appears to be less a correction to bad educational and pedagogical practices than it is a prescription for removing debate, cultural differences, and diverse theoretical orientations from the sphere of schooling. Moreover, it runs the risk of preventing teachers from becoming public intellectuals, actively engaged in the process of linking their own teaching and the institutional role of schooling to the struggle for substantive democracy and social justice. Commitment is not the disease of an oppressive partisanship, it is the basis for making teachers aware of what it means to be active subjects of history, rather than guardians of an unproblematic and nostalgic view of the past. What is at stake in the current debate about political correctness is not the recognition of the alleged tyranny of a handful of progressive educators, but the fear that democracy inspires in the orthodox guardians of traditionalist culture.

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The conservative has little to fear from the man whose reason is the servant of his passions, but let him beware of him in whom reason has become the greatest and most terrible of his passions.

—John Burdon Sanderson Haldane
British scientist, 1892–1964