White Noise: The Attack on Political Correctness and the Struggle for the Western Canon

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ABSTRACT: This paper provides a critical overview of the debate about political correctness and the status of the Western Canon in education. The paper analyses a number of critical themes in the debate: Who is it under attack? What is the Canon which is to be defended? Why does it need to be defended? And what notions of knowing and learning underlie the arguments of the proponents of the Canon? After outlining the ways in which the arguments of those attacking political correctness and defending the Canon are profoundly flawed, the paper suggests that the case for multiculturalism and diversified curriculum needs to be substantially strengthened if it is to present a viable alternative.

KEYWORDS: The Canon, multiculturalism, political correctness, higher education.

The debate about *political correctness*, *multiculturalism*, and the status of the *Western Canon* has raged across the United States and elsewhere since the beginning of the 1990s.

At the populist end of the spectrum, we hear talk show host, Rush Limbaugh. His weekly audience is reportedly 20 million people. He has a cult following of "dittoheads," people who pride themselves on agreeing with Rush on just about everything. And cafes around the country have special "Rush rooms" where like minded people can have a coffee while listening to his radio program. With this kind of influence, he is credited by the Gingrich Republicans as being a key to their fantastic success in the 1994 Congressional elections. This is Rush's contribution to the debate about cultural diversity in the curriculum:

> In this 500th anniversary year of Columbus's voyage, I'm tired of hearing him trashed. I don't give a hoot that he gave some Indians a disease that they didn't have immunity against. We can't change that, we're here .... I'm sick and tired of Western culture constantly being disparaged. 'Hey, hey, ho, ho, Western culture's got to go,' is the chant at Stanford University. What would Stanford be if the pioneers that are so reviled today as imperialists, racists, sexists, bigots, and homophobes hadn't fought their way across a continent to California? .... The American middle class is just plain tired and worn out. They are blamed for everything in this country .... We have the spaced-out Hollywood left eating beans and rice to focus on the evils of capitalism .... In schools, we are teaching kids about tribal Africa instead of Aristotle. (Edsall, 1994, p. 9)

At the other end of the spectrum, essentially the same a debate is raging within the halls of higher education. This time, it's in the form of an argument within the academic family about what constitutes greatness in high culture and what is worth teaching. Yale Academic Allan Bloom (1987) decries cultural decay in his *Closing of the American Mind.* Harold Bloom (1994) suggests what a solid, back-to-the-basics curriculum might cover in *The Western Canon.*When all is said and done, there would be little about America and its culture upon which Allan Bloom, Harold Bloom, and Rush Limbaugh could disagree:

> The West is defined by its need for justification of its ways or values, by its need for discovery of nature, by its need for philosophy and science. This is its cultural imperative. Deprived of that, it will collapse. The United States is one of the highest and most extreme achievements of the rational quest for the good life according to nature. (Bloom, A., 1987, p. 39)

In medium, but not in message, there is a middle ground of respectable investigative journalism. Richard Bernstein is representative, in his pieces in the *New York Times* (Bernstein, 1990), and then a book, *Dictatorship of Virtue* (Bernstein, 1994).

> There is a school of French historians that uses the word *dérapage* to describe the fateful moment when the Great Revolution of 1789, the first monumental effort to break the chain, skidded from the enlightened universalism of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen into the rule of the Committee of Public Safety and the Terror. Dérapage, which literally means 'skid' or 'slide,' refers to the way fanaticism and dogmatism swept the great upheaval from constitutionalism to dictatorship .... The word *dérapage* has stuck in my mind as I have studied a movement that is gathering force in the United States during the past decade or so, aimed supposedly at greater inclusiveness of all the country's diverse component parts .... I am speaking of multiculturalism, which is the term that has emerged to encompass a host of activities ... from teaching first graders in

Oregon about the achievements of sub-Saharan African civilisation to racial set-asides and quotas at newspapers on the East Coast. (Bernstein, 1994, pp. 3-4)

Here are three snapshots of the debate, three kinds intervention, selected as symptomatic of the tenor of the argument. To reuse Bernstein's word, each is also symptomatic of its slippages. One slippage is from apocalyptic talk about imminent the end of Western civilisation to the minutiae of courses at Stanford or what first graders are taught about Africa in Oregon. Another slippage is from the unashamedly elitist defence of high culture by Ivy League Allan Bloom, to the journalism of Richard Bernstein in a newspaper as respected as the *New York Times,* to the anti-intellectual populism of talk show host Rush Limbaugh. Still another slippage is from rhetorical defence of free speech and political pluralism to nationalist demagoguery about the singular virtues of the United States.

These are not the sorts of slippages that should work. It's hard to believe that multiculturalism really spells the end of the American Way of Life and Western civilisation as we know it. It's hard to see how such a diverse range of voices speaking against the alleged menace of Political Correctness (PC), could ever form a united front. Nor is it clear how PC itself, elevated to the status of a movement by giving it an acronym, could ever be a united enemy. And the hysteria in the air is so powerful that it's hard to believe the anti-multiculturalism lobby is really as pluralistic and as open in its intentions as it claims to be. Yet the slippages have worked, at least insofar as they have created confusion and added to the prevailing sense of anxiety. This is a very powerful political movement. Its rhetoric has had, and is continuing to have, a profound political effect.

The anti-PC and anti-multiculturalism arguments present in this way a call to battle. *Multiculturalism and the Battle for America's Future* is the subtitle of Bernstein's book (1994) and his opening quote is from Robespierre: "Terror is naught but prompt, severe, inflexible justice; it is therefore an emanation of virtue." Multiculturalism therefore is the totalitarian enemy – the enemy of all that is good and right about The American Way. And the leaders of The American Way, who in turn represent a kind of practical embodiment of the principles of the Western Canon, consist mainly of white males, now ungraciously maligned. This is an explicit defence of the cultural and political establishment, dead and living.

In the din of battle, balanced argument and reasoned assessment are necessarily discarded. All we can hear is white noise, a stream of slogans which dispense with rationality and create a sense of fear and foreboding. It becomes impossible to discern the modulations in the counter arguments of the proponents

of multiculturalism, and even to notice the enormous slippages in the arguments of the anti-PC brigade.

It is time to stand still for a moment and attempt a critical overview of the fracas taking place on this battlefield. To achieve this, we need to consider a number of the recurring themes. First, there is a common view of the enemy: an unholy alliance of the various "isms" – feminism, multiculturalism, poststructuralism, and the like – which have taken the place of communism as the common enemy of the West. They are now the enemy within who need to be exposed in much the same way as McCarthyism, in its time, exposed foes that were allegedly much more dangerous than they seemed. And second, there is a common view of what has to be defended, an icon best represented in high culture by the Western Canon. The arguments against PC and in defence of the Western Canon are underpinned by a powerful nationalism, in which the United States is the highest achievement of the West. In this view, the success of the United States is as *Unum*, one nation, at the expense of discussion of how community and communities are constituted through the *Ex Pluribus* part of the national motto. This necessitates a common view of knowing and learning, for if truth resides in the Canon and the Canon speaks for itself, then teaching is a matter of imparting the truth and learning a matter of receiving it. Common to the critics of PC is a an overwhelmingly negative view of the state of education – so negative, in fact, it weakens the public integrity of institutions now very much under attack by the forces of economic rationalism.

Of course, part of the problem lies with the intellectual and political stance of the people under attack. There is a grain of truth in the arguments of those attacking PC, multiculturalism, and all the other contemporary "isms." Agnostic relativism, a withdrawal into cultural and intellectual particularisms, a tokenistic view of difference that accompanies real failure to engage on issues of access and equity – these are some quite fundamental difficulties. The issues upon which the debates focus are still very real and still very important. They can only be addressed, however, by a pluralism which transforms the mainstream.

Political Correctness: The Changing Life and Times of an Idea

The term political correctness first gained currency in the student movement of the 1960s. Then, different party lines developed as the anti-Soviet new left debated various ideological alternatives. At the political extreme there were revolutionary frameworks such as Maoism and Trotskyism. Taking a more moderate stand were various liberal democratic "reformisms" which suggested an incremental approach to civilising capitalism such as through the creation of a

welfare state. The term was at the time used ironically as a kind of self-deprecating antidote to holier-than-thou ideological purism, unquestioned conventional wisdoms, and rigid party-political nostrums.

Suddenly, in the fall of 1990, political correctness found its way into mainstream political discussion. Never in its original usage did the term gain the widespread currency it has had since 1990. A subtle, but nevertheless significant semantic shift had occurred at this moment.

A term that had been created as a warning against glib ideological orthodoxy was now being used to describe something that was alleged to be shamefacedly precisely that. Worse still, capitalised and elevated to the status of an acronym, the term was used to tie together as a political movement a coalition of groups – multicultural, feminist, gay – that barely resembled the new left of the 1960s. The implication was that they represented a coherent ideological phalange which threatened intellectual freedom in the United States. PC was identified as a new and threatening McCarthyism of the left.

The moment of this semantic shift can be identified quite precisely. When *New York Times* journalist Richard Bernstein attended the Western Humanities Conference at the University of California, Berkeley, he reported that "a cluster of opinions have converged about race, ecology, feminism, culture and foreign policy defines a kind of 'correct' attitude to the problems of the world, a sort of unofficial ideology of the university (Bernstein, 1990, p. 4). A *Newsweek* cover story took the argument one step further: "Watch What You Say. There is a 'Politically Correct' Way to Talk About Race, Sex and Ideas. Is This the New Enlightenment on Campus, or the new McCarthyism?" (Adler, et al., 1990, p. 48). Columnist George Will was soon calling PC

> a war of aggression against the Western political tradition and the ideas that animate it. The aggressors, having been trounced in the real-world politics of the larger society, are attempting to make campuses into mini-states that do what the western tradition prohibits real states from doing: imposing orthodoxies. (1991, p. 72)

A flurry of stories kept the debate on the front pages of magazines and newspapers for much of 1991: *The Atlantic Monthly* (D'Souza, 1991a), *The New Republic* (Howe, 1991)*, The Wall Street Journal* (Rabinowitz, 1990), *New York Magazine* (Taylor, 1991), *The World and I* (Rothman, 1991).

By the spring of 1991, even the President of the United States was using the term. Speaking at a commencement day ceremony at the University of Michigan in May of that year, President Bush complained that the "notion of political correctness ... declares certain topics off limits, certain expressions off limits ...

[it] attempts to micro manage casual conversation ... [to] crush diversity in the name of diversity" (quoted by Cockburn, 1991, p. 1).

There was a larger context, however, to the emergence of the idea of political correctness. This context was conservative anxiety about the state of education in the United States, and particularly education in the humanities. The term PC emerged from these educational debates, and this is where we need to return to explain its meaning and enduring influence.

From the early 1980s, the intellectual right began to express its concern about what it alleged was a decline of teaching and research in the humanities. Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Education, William Bennett, published the highly influential *To Reclaim a Legacy: A Report on the Humanities in Higher Education* (1984). Then, several years later, two books hit the best seller list: E.D. Hirsch's *Cultural Literacy* (1988) and Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* (1987). Hirsch's book was an extended argument decrying the drop in educational standards in the United States and the failure of the education system to teach a common national culture. His argument was followed by a list of 5,000 names, phrases, dates, and concepts – things that 'Every American Needs to Know,' the subtitle of the book announces without hint of equivocation. Allan Bloom's book, subtitled *How Higher Education has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Souls of Today's Students,* was an extended critique of humanities education in universities. This was followed in 1994 by Harold Bloom's manifesto stating what, in his view, students should actually be taught instead – *The Western Canon.* If political correctness represented the enemy, the Western Canon and a common culture could be seen to represent the educational values that must be defended.

In another influential series of interventions, Diane Ravitch, produced a report with Chester Finn lamenting how little students have learnt by the time they have left school (1988), and then weighed into the debate about multiculturalism in higher education (Ravitch, 1990a; 1990b) and standards (1994). So, by the beginning of the 1990s, the debate about higher education had reached a fever pitch. The titles screamed: *Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education* (Sykes, 1988); *The Hollow Men: Politics and Corruption in Higher Education* (Sykes, 1990); "The Campus: An Island of Repression in a Sea of Freedom" (Finn, 1989); *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America* (Smith, 1990); *Tenured Radicals: How Politics has Corrupted Our Higher Education* (Kimball, 1991).

Whilst still covering essentially the same ground, after 1991 this debate became increasingly framed around the notion of political correctness – a tag that seemed to symbolise an educational rot. Leading the continuing attack on political

correctness and its attendant dangers were Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* (1991b), Bernstein's *Dictatorship of Virtue* (1994), Henry's *In Defence of Elitism* (1994), and Kurzweil and Phillips' edited collection, *Our Country, Our Culture* (1994). Key texts soon emerged countering the anti-PC push, or at least presenting a two sided view of the debate. These included parts of a book by Stanley Fish (1994), and several edited collections (Berman, 1992; Newfield & Strickland, 1995).

In this essay, we will focus on a number of the key writers, particularly E.D. Hirsch, Allan Bloom, Harold Bloom, and Dinesh D'Souza. Symptomatic texts are discussed in order to highlight the cultural, epistemological, and pedagogical issues raised in the debate about political correctness and the status of the Canon. There were important differences among the views of these writers that might be the subject of a comparative review of their books (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1988). Allan Bloom's primary concern, for instance, is with the appropriate education of an elite (Kalantzis, 1988). Hirsch is more of a populist, wanting all Americans to speak a common, national language (Cope,1988). And D'Souza, less of a United States nationalist than the others, argues in favour of a pan-Western liberalism while also admitting the value of including certain non-Western classics into the cultural Canon that he argues should be taught in United States universities. None of these differences on either side, however, have ever become a significant part of the public debate. In order to reconsider the issues at stake – and since it is the public debate which is most relevant for its actual educational consequences – we will focus on the symptomatic common points and the profound intellectual affinities in the main texts.

Defining the Enemy

"The new orthodoxy owes its most immediate inspiration to Michel Foucault," says the journalist Siegel, making his contribution to the debate (1991, p. 34). If the ultimate blame for the intellectual decline is to be attributed to any one person, it seems it has to be to this French historian. Fortunately, the *post mortem* performed to ascertain the causes of the alleged death of the Western Canon and its traditional curriculum has rarely been this simplistic.

D'Souza argues that the real threat to the Canon has come from a broad intellectual shift in which Foucault, indeed, was one of the brightest stars. "Formalism, hermeneutics, psychoanalytic theory, semiotics, structuralism, Marxism, deconstructionism ... poststructuralism, postmodernism" – these add up to a serious challenge to the idea that there might be a transcendent Canon capable of expressing a singular cultural Truth. In literature, for example, schools

of criticism have emerged under banners like deconstruction and poststructuralism that are "based on the denial of textual meaning." Now, there is politics and historical contingency in both writing and reading. Intellectually, "the various systems are symbiotic, drawing on many of the same sources, and operating toward the common end of destroying traditional literary criticism, and perhaps indeed the literary text itself" (D'Souza, 1991b, pp. 177, 157).

Harold Bloom targeted the practitioners of the same intellectual movements: "Feminists, Afrocentrists, Marxists, Foucault-inspired New Historicists, [and] Deconstructors." These he labelled as the "School of Resentment," opposed to originality, the "literary equivalent of such terms as individual enterprise, self-reliance, and competition" (Bloom, H., 1994, p. 20). Comparative literature, Allan Bloom claimed referring to his own academic specialism, had fallen under the spell of deconstructionists whose inspiration comes from Derrida, Foucault, and Barthes (Bloom, A., 1987, p. 379).

If there were to be a single source of these intellectual positions, it seems it must be Marxism. "Politically, PC is Marxist in origin, in the broad sense of attempting to redistribute power from the privileged class (white males) to the oppressed masses," pronounced *Newsweek* in its 1990 cover story (Adler, et al., 1990, p. 53). Bernstein agreed:

> The problem is that so much of what is being claimed under the banner of the new is actually a stale, simple minded, Manichaean, and imitative reformulation of that discredited nineteenth-century concept called Marxism, its creases of great age masked by the lipstick and rouge of a new terminology. (Bernstein, 1994, pp. 226-227)

The (not yet Canonical?) writer Doris Lessing claims that political correctness is evidence of the persistence of communist habits of mind. "While we have seen the apparent death of Communism, ways of thinking that were born under Communism ... still govern our lives." Political correctness, as an exercise in consciousness raising, is actually a form of authoritarianism. And, after all, "there is obviously something very attractive about telling other people what to do .... Raising consciousness ... like political correctness, is a continuation of that old bully, the Party Line" (Lessing, 1994, pp. 117, 121, 120).

Having attacked what he regards as "the worst aspect of what gets called 'political correctness'" namely the unwillingness to assert that any "one idea, contribution or attainment is better than any other," Henry's *In Defense of Elitism* (1994) identified misplaced egalitarianism as the root of the problem:

> However much Karl Marx may have been rejected by the nations that once enshrined him and ostensibly followed his dicta, American egalitarians continue to believe Marxian romantic twaddle about the invariable

> blamelessness of the unaccomplished. They argue that talent is distributed absolutely evenly along class and educational lines, in defiance of everything we know about eugenics. (Henry, 1994, pp. 3,17-18)

When we can finally reach eugenics, having journeyed there via Marxism, we have surely reached the point at which the discussion has gone off the rails.

In other moments, multiculturalism has been specifically identified as the heir of Marxism. Says Stanley Rothman, who has no less an academic credential than Mary Huggins Gamble Professor of Government at Smith College and director of the Center for the Study of Social and Political Change: "Multiculturalism has clearly become a substitute for Marxism and even neo-Marxism, both of which are now in a period of at least temporary decline, given events in Eastern Europe and elsewhere" (Rothman, 1991, p. 469).

Or, perhaps multiculturalism is but a catchall term for a panoply of intellectual evils, all bent on undermining Western Culture. This is Roger Kimball:

> Multiculturalism provides a convenient umbrella for the smorgasbord of radical ideologies regnant in the academy. The one thing your literary deconstructionist, your Lacanian feminist, your post-structuralist Marxist, your new historicist, and your devotee of what goes under the name of 'cultural studies' can agree on is that the Western humanistic tradition is a repository of ideas that are naive, repressive, or both. (Kimball, 1991, p. 192)

But what does this convenient aggregation of the enemy really mean? Foucault was neither a Marxist, nor a multiculturalist, nor even a deconstructionist. Most deconstructionists are opposed to Marxism because they interpret it as having no less a Canonical view of Truth than the intellectual positions represented by Harold Bloom, Hirsch, and D'Souza. Most feminists are neither deconstructionists, nor multiculturalists, nor poststructuralists, nor Marxists.

Rather ironically for avid proponents of supposed intellectual Truth, this aggregation is little more than a rhetorical ploy. If they were to read the various texts the way they claim texts should be read – for what they 'really' say – they would find their allegations have almost no basis in Truth. By portraying a large and unified enemy, their campaigns for freedom do little more than create an atmosphere of fear that makes freedom impossible.

Having won the Cold War against the threat of communism, Bernstein argues, Americans have lost that self-same war to the enemy within. *Dérapage* is Bernstein's word, drawing an analogy between multiculturalism and the terror that followed the French Revolution.

> Instead of celebrating our victory, the country plunged headlong into multiculturalism .... The multiculturalists have won, but their victory depends

> on their declining to claim it. Since theirs is an antiestablishment rebellion,
> a victory of virtue, they thrive by maintaining the fiction that they are
> nothing but small voices struggling to be heard in the louder cacophony of
> the dominant discourse. (Bernstein, 1994, pp. 218, 231)

Going beyond explanations rooted in intellectual and political movements, Allan Bloom points to a deep cultural and educational loss of faith. This is another of the enemies. As an academic who has served in such august institutions as Yale and Cornell, he tells us of the cultural affliction he observes in new generations of students. They have withdrawn into themselves, he complains. They have become atomised individuals with little sense of social purpose or ethical responsibility. They have fallen under the spell of a feminism which dooms strong and enduring bonds of family, as men and women put a growing premium on careers and personal autonomy. This evidently leads to the multiple evils of easy divorce, sexual freedom, and the devaluation of love. And when it comes to the issue of 'race,' Blacks have increasingly resorted to celebrating their difference. As a consequence, a new segregation has developed.

The university curriculum, Bloom argues, has contributed to this malaise. There is no longer an overarching vision or coherence in the academy. Undergraduate study has become fragmented into an array of specialist subjects. Few now ask the fundamental human questions. "The so-called knowledge explosion and increasing specialisation have not filled up the college years but emptied them." One aspect of this shift is the increasing popularity of professional courses narrowly aimed at a career, and most importantly, at making money. In the major United States universities, approximately 20% of undergraduates by the late 1980s were undertaking economics majors. Another symptom is the emergence of new specialisms, reflecting and exacerbating the social fragmentation of the student body itself: Black Studies, Women's Studies, Intercultural Studies, Peace Studies, and the like. "The crisis of liberal education," concludes Allan Bloom, "is a reflection of a crisis at the peaks of learning, an incoherence and incompatibility among the first principles with which we interpret the world, an intellectual crisis of the greatest magnitude, which constitutes the crisis of our civilization" (Bloom, A., 1987, pp. 30, 346).

Some courses, it seems, even set out to exacerbate social division and fragmentation. Herbert London, a senior academic at New York University, says of the new courses:

> Some are superficial attempts to capture Zeitgeist and student interest, for
> example, film aesthetics; others are designed to express dismay with the
> social *status quo,* such as feminist studies and peace studies; and still others
> are organised as an exercise in revolutionary thought: semiotics,

phenomenology, deconstruction and post structuralism. (London, 1991, pp. 475-476)

Like Allan Bloom, Hirsch sees intellectual and curriculum fragmentation as the root of the problem. Although his focus is on school curriculum, he raises the same sorts of issues as D'Souza and Bloom. He tries to show how excessive specialisation and narrow utilitarianism can prove to be not so useful at all; how cultural fragmentation has been exacerbated by diversifying the curriculum according to the different backgrounds or interests of students; how the tracking of students and diversifying the curriculum according to ability or workforce destinations produces an academic caste system; and how the "shopping mall high school" with its array of options in fact limits and narrows students' educational and professional choices. Says Hirsch,

> The failure of our schools to create a literate society is sometimes excused on the grounds that the schools have been asked to do too much. They are asked, for example, to pay due regard to the demands of both local and national acculturation. They are asked, for example, to teach not only American history but also state and city history, driving, cardiopulmonary resuscitation, consumerism, carpentry, cooking and other subjects. They are given the task of teaching information that is sometimes too rudimentary and sometimes too specialized .... In some of our national moods we would like the schools to teach everything, but they cannot. Combined with the unwillingness of our schools to place demands on students ... the inevitable consequence of the shopping mall high school is a lack of shared knowledge across and within schools. It would be harder to invent a more effective recipe for cultural fragmentation. (Hirsch, 1988, pp. 25, 20-21)

Hirsch proves his case by drawing on research which purports to show a general decline in educational standards. How else could we explain the superiority of the Japanese economy over the United States economy other than in terms of the greater success of the Japanese education system at teaching high level literacy? (Hirsch, 1988, pp. 1-2).

All this adds up to a very broad ranging critique in which a lot of people are to blame for the alleged abandonment of the Canon and for the consequent educational decline: Michel Foucault; the deconstructionists; a goodly proportion of the most influential intellectual movements of the 20th century, if we add together Marxists, semioticians, structuralists, poststructuralists, and so on; the multiculturalists; the people who at the university level have presided over the diversification of curriculum into ever more specialisms; the purveyors of the "shopping mall" high school; and amoral and self serving students. The enemy is everywhere.

And who, if the enemy of my enemy is my friend, is the enemy's enemy? The white men who still defend the Western Canon against the onslaught. There is still virtue and truth, to be found now in the lofty sentiments of the Canon and its supporters. If the United States is less racist, less sexist, and less homophobic than ever before, says Bernstein, the credit must be handed to "white men ... for having created the sensibility and values that see these things as evils in the first place" (1994, pp. 185, 214).

This is a discourse of enemies and battles, in which wars are being won and lost, and in which, in the terms of Kurzweil and Phillips' book title, the future of "our country" and "our culture" is at stake (1994). The question remains, how real is the enemy? Do poststructuralism, multiculturalism, feminism, and the rest of the list of evils pose a threat to Western Civilisation and its American incarnation? How many professors have lost their jobs because the PC police have successfully prosecuted their ideologies and practices and found them guilty of racism or sexism? In these senses, it is a phoney war and paranoia is the enemy.

Yet the question "what is correct?" is a real one. There is a certain reality – truth and correctness without the capitals – to the demographic growth of historical minorities; to the growing claims of minorities to cultural recognition and educational equity; to the end of the cultural and economic supremacy of the West in this phase of globalization; and to the increasing participation of women in economic and public life. If white men and the old intellectual establishment are disoriented and disturbed – if they feel they are being told new and uncongenial truths – they are right. The world really is changing.

Defending the Western Canon

A succession of student protests at Stanford University led to the replacement of the three course "Western Civilisation" strand in the fall of 1989 with a new sequence of courses: "Cultures, Ideas, Values." Up until this time, all incoming students had been steered through "Western Civilisation" as part of their core curriculum, a program which examined the philosophy, literature, and history of the West, focusing on such thinkers and writers as Plato, Dante, Machiavelli, Voltaire, Marx, and Freud; and events such as the ascent of Greece, the fall of Rome, medieval Christian civilisation, the Renaissance and Reformation, the French and Scottish Enlightenment, and the founding of modern states. The new "Cultures, Ideas, Values" sequence investigated topics such as 'Technology and Values' through a cross cultural survey of ideas and mores. This program was still to include prominently Western perspectives, but it also added African, Japanese, Indian, and Middle Eastern ones. "A special effort was promised not

to imply any superiority of Western ideas or Western Culture – all cultures would be sustained on a plane of equality," explains D'Souza as he recounts this story. In the new curriculum, "'other voices' would find themselves included and indeed emphasised" (D'Souza, 1991b, pp. 61, 67).

Student protests in favour of the old course and a good deal of media publicity followed Stanford's decision to shift in a direction D'Souza labels pluralism and relativism, a decision *de facto* to downgrade things Western in the curriculum. Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Education, William Bennett, showed up on the campus in 1988 to denounce the new curriculum as a "political, not an educational decision." The University, he said, had been "brought down by the forces of ignorance, irrationality and intimidation" (D'Souza, 1991b, p. 68).

Another anecdote: At Duke University in North Carolina, D'Souza documents what he considers to be the same sort of rejection of the Western Canon. "A Duke catalog from 1960-61, for instance, emphasizes courses on English composition, thinking and writing clearly, persuasive speaking and argumentation, along with courses on Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, the English novel, modern European drama, and American literature from 1800 to 1920." But by the beginning of the 1990s, there were English courses such as the one offered by Frank Lentricchia entitled "Paranoia, Politics and Other Pleasures" which surveyed such material as Don DeLillo's *White Noise,* Mario Puzo's *The Godfather,* and Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* movies. Lentricchia's purpose was to demonstrate that organized crime is "a metaphor for American business as usual." Lentricchia was just one of the new intellectual guard in the humanities at Duke, which also included Stanley Fish – poststructuralist reader response theory; Louis Henry Gates – Afro-American literature; Fredric Jameson – Marxist cultural theory; and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick – radical feminism and gay studies (D'Souza, 1991b, p. 162).

These anecdotes are significant only insofar as a relatively small number of pieces of 'evidence' have been kept in circulation in the United States, recycled by disgruntled academics as they 'come out' in one media intervention after another, and by journalists reporting on the PC phenomenon. For example, the D'Souza's Stanford story is repeated by Rothman (1991, p. 467) and Kimball (1991, pp. 2, 27-32). The Duke story is also retold by Kimball (1991, pp. 142-165).

But what is it that the supposed enemies of the Canon seem so intent on attacking or displacing? Just what is this Canon that needs to be restored to its rightful place?

Harold Bloom (1994) is one of the few who have taken the trouble to define the main terms of the discussion. For him, the Canon consists of those texts that

are "authoritative in our culture." And authors and their texts are selected as authoritative "both for their sublimity and their representative nature." For Bloom, these criteria lack politics and ideology. Unlike the stance of the multiculturalists, the Canon

> cannot be ideological, or place itself in the service of any social aims, however morally admirable. One breaks into the canon only by aesthetic strength: mastery of figurative language, originality, cognitive power, knowledge, exuberance of diction .... Whatever the Western Canon is, it is not a program for social salvation. (Bloom, H., 1994, pp.1-2, 29)

There are no surprises here. This is a fairly predictable and conventional definition of literary significance. Even less surprising is Bloom's conviction that one person sits unequivocally at the pinnacle of this kind of Canonical excellence: Shakespeare.

More interesting is what Harold Bloom's view of the Canon hides. It pretends universality, but on the basis of just one, and now possibly minority professional view of literary significance. There are other measures, including the extent to which an author and a text 'speak to' issues of moral and social significance and the extent to which they are authoritative in, or representative of, a particular group rather than Bloom's version of "our culture." Even the idea that there might be a singular Western Canon is a highly political assessment. It is based on the view that there is a universal high culture of such significance as to be representative or authoritative. And behind this assessment, Bloom's rhetorical agenda is salvation – reorienting elite culture to the sublimity of the Canon and the West to its cultural essence – even if he is personally pessimistic in the environment of the "closing of the American mind."

Beyond these fundamental difficulties, precisely who and what are in the Western Canon? The answer to this question is by no means clear. For a start, many figures that one might consider Canonical are peremptorily thrown out of the Canon. Take Allan Bloom's attack on the deconstructionists, influenced as he says they are "by the post-Sartrean generation of Parisian Heideggerians" (Bloom, A., 1987, p. 379). Even if we were to admit that Derrida, Foucault, and Barthes, the trio named by Bloom, and their American followers (including no less than the postwar Yale school of literary criticism), do not deserve a place in the Canon, does this mean that Sartre and Heidegger have to go too? After all, they would have had the same problems with Bloom's Truth as have their followers and their followers' followers. The intellectual lineage is there. Bloom has to admit this. And, if Sartre and Heidegger are thrown out, possibly Husserl and certainly Nietzsche would have to go on the same grounds. Perhaps Marx, too.

The poststructuralists and deconstructionists do owe a partial debt to Western European Marxism, even though they deliberately keep their distance.

Independent of the connections with poststructuralism and deconstruction, moreover, the Marxist intellectual tradition is one which the critics of PC and the supporters of the Canon are obviously uncomfortable about placing within their Western Canon. But how can Marx be understood other than as a Young Hegelian, and as a disciple of Smith and Ricardo? If recent Western Marxists go, does Marx go? If Marx goes, do Hegel, Smith, and Ricardo go? If we throw out the semioticians who question the fixity of Truth, do we have to make a clean sweep as far back as Sassure, who, more than anybody else, set this train of thought in motion? If we throw out Lacan, do we also have to throw out Freud? To finish D'Souza's list of people who have undermined the Canon, just what are we left with when we also throw away hermeneutics, formalism, structuralism, and their predecessors?

Then, there is Allan Bloom's complaint that so many students are taking economics (to make money, rather than absorb the Truths of Great Books). Would not a stream of quintessentially Western intellectuals from Adam Smith to Milton Friedman – surely, *Great Men* writing *Great Books* – find their ideas and ideals about the workings of capitalism vindicated by the latter day popularity of their academic and political vocation? Rather ironically, there are moments where the critics of supposed educational and intellectual decline seem to be trashing so many of the white, male heroes of Western high culture that there is not much left to make up a Canon.

Some of the greatest philosophers of education are also defined as enemies of the Canon, enemies because they questioned in one way or another the very principle of a Canon and its consequent pedagogy of transmission. John Dewey, according to Allan Bloom, "saw the past as radically imperfect and regarded our history as irrelevant or a hindrance to rational analysis of our present." Like John Stuart Mill, Dewey taught that the only danger confronting us was to be closed to the emergent, the new, the manifestations of progress (Bloom, A., 1987, pp. 56, 29). Hirsch agrees about Dewey's culpability. The blame for declining Cultural Literacy, in the last analysis, is to be laid on "faulty educational theories." Hirsch traces the genesis of Dewey's ideas back to Rousseau (a favourite of Bloom's, incidentally). Rousseau believed in the natural development of children. Do not impose adult ideas, he said, because abilities develop naturally. Dewey, Hirsch goes on, took Rousseau a step further and argued that education was not about piling information on information. Rather, it was about dealing with experience and solving problems; learning how to learn rather than learning screeds of received culture; process rather than content (Hirsch, 1988,

pp. xiv-xv). When John Dewey is defrocked for his opposition to the principle of Canon and piling cultural facts onto learners, do we also have to defrock Rousseau (Hirsch's point) and John Stuart Mill (Bloom's point) as co-conspirators?

More broadly, what do we do with philosophical liberalism and libertarianism, to be found both on the political right and the political left? These are strains of thought, after all, that are more concerned with progress, and more focused on advocating various projects of modernity and development, than they are in the sort of tradition invoked and prescribed by the idea of a Canon. Beyond their educational pronouncements, John Stuart Mill and Dewey were formidable philosophers of modernity. They taught us, lamentably in Allan Bloom's view, that "no attention had to be paid to the fundamental principles or the moral virtues that inclined men to live according to them. To use language now popular, civic culture was neglected. And this turn in liberalism is what prepared us for cultural relativism" (Bloom, A., 1987, pp. 56, 29). There is a lot of truth in this, even if Bloom exaggerates the radical political consequences of liberalism. The very moral and epistemological principles so anathema to this version of the Canon are themselves central to the Western tradition. A modernism of progress which overcomes the dead weight of tradition; certain cultural relativisms, from the liberal, museophile fascination with and framing of the exotic, to a politics of live and let live that culminates in Apartheid; various libertarianisms that favour the culturally open logic of the market over the cultural weight of nation and state – these are just some examples of eminently conservative, eminently Canonical ideas that are quite incompatible with the idiosyncratic view of the Canon that is represented in this debate.

Not surprisingly, then, the contents of each person's own Canon is at times remarkably eccentric. For instance, Harold Bloom wants to remove most philosophy from the Canon. Not only does he mount the case that Shakespeare "wrote the best prose and the best poetry in the Western Tradition." He goes so far as to claim that "there is no cognitive originality in the whole history of philosophy comparable to Shakespeare's." He includes Aristotle and Plato, but no other philosophers in his 1994 list (Bloom, H., 1994, pp. 10, 532, 540). And whereas D'Souza would, following Matthew Arnold, include non-Western cultures in "the best that has been thought and said" (D'Souza & MacNeil, 1992, p. 31), Harold Bloom includes the Koran and Sanskrit texts, but not Chinese, and excludes African-American and feminist texts as mere "period pieces" (Bloom, H., 1994, p. 531, 540).

So, the more seriously we take the idea of a Canon, the smaller it gets and the more disagreement there is about its contents. The proponents of the Canon

not only cut out those things which seem inimical to their own particular variety of social and cultural conservatism. At various times, they also want to throw away some of the greatest luminaries of the modern Western political and economic order. Rousseau and Mill are more useful to many contemporary conservatisms than they are to feminism and multiculturalism, to cite just two of the movements that, it is alleged, wantonly set out to tear apart the social fabric. The proponents of the Canon are not just natural conservatives. They are conservatives whose minds are closed even to certain Canonical conservatisms. Indeed, their cultural logic ends up being distinctly circular: the Canon is made up of those people whose ideas are consistent with their idea of a Western Canon.

The advocates of the Canon are decidedly dismissive of culture that is other than canonical, culture that is not worthy of consideration by the intellectual elite and not worthy of study in universities. This is what Allan Bloom says about popular music, by way of contrast with the sublimity and cognitive power of the Canon:

> Rock music provides premature ecstasy and, in this respect, is like the drugs with which it is allied. It artificially induces the exaltation naturally attached to the completion of the greatest endeavours – victory in a just war, consummated love, artistic creation, religious devotion and discovery of the truth. Without effort, without talent, without virtue, without exercise of the faculties, anyone and everyone is accorded the equal right to the enjoyment of their fruits .... Picture a thirteen year-old boy sitting in the living room of his family home doing his math assignment while wearing his Walkman headphones or watching MTV. He enjoys the liberties hard won over centuries by the alliance of philosophic genius and political heroism, consecrated by the blood of martyrs; he is provided with comfort and leisure by the most productive economy ever known to mankind; science has penetrated the secrets of nature in order to provide him with the marvellous, lifelike electronic sound and image reproduction he is enjoying. And in what does progress culminate? A pubescent child whose body throbs with orgasmic rhythms; whose feelings are made articulate in hymns to the joys of onanism or the killing of parents; whose ambition is to win fame and wealth in imitating the drag-queen who makes the music. (Bloom, A., 1987, pp. 80, 75)

And, to Bloom's horror, it's not just "one particular class of child" that is corrupted by rock, but his privileged students, who should otherwise be reading Great Books (Bloom, A., 1987, p. 75).

"Sometimes I try to visualize Dr. Johnson or George Elliot confronting MTV Rap or experiencing Virtual Reality and I find myself heartened by what I believe would be their ironical, strong refusal of such irrational entertainments" (Bloom, H., 1994, p. 517). It just happens, by the way, that the culture which Harold

Bloom dismisses with such vitriol has deep roots in an African-American history; that the inspiration for a dazzlingly vibrant modern music is imported from the margins. But is this an accident? How many self-fulfilling prophecies are there in the selection of those sufficiently worthy to wear the mantle of the Canon?

Bernstein looks at popular culture and sees in *ET* and *Dances with Wolves* signs of cultural decline. "*Dances with Wolves* replaces one myth, that of the brave settler and the savage Indian, with another – the morally advanced friend-of-the-earth Indian ... and the malodorous, foulmouthed, bellicose white man" (Bernstein, 1994, p. 223).

And Henry mounts an unashamed defence of cultural elitism because it would be unrealistic to expect anything of particular cultural value to originate anywhere else.

> We cannot reinvent the past to pretend that the dispossessed made glorious contributions then, or that studying the quotidian existences of bygone peasants and serving wenches will more than marginally enlighten us about the past's richest legacy, the high-culture attainments for which these serfs provided, at best, support staff. (Henry, 1994, p. 15)

"Greatness" or "what makes the author and the works canonical," says Harold Bloom, is also a function of "strangeness, a mode of originality that either cannot be assimilated, or that so assimilates us that we cease to see it as strange." Canons, he says, are in their nature complex and contradictory. They have "anything but ... unity or stable structure." They are "achieved anxieties" (Bloom, H., 1994, pp. 37, 38). Yet just how open are the proponents of the Canon to things that are not readily assimilable, strangeness, contradictoriness, and even anxiety? Just how open is Allan Bloom's American mind and Harold Bloom's Western Canon? Just how liberal is D'Souza's diatribe against the cacophony of supposed illiberalisms he hears in the university? The proponents of the Canon in fact advocate a radical intellectual closure, a closure which is not even representative of the historical characteristics of the Canon itself. The new or the disruptive, it seems, cannot be canonical. But how else did the historical Canon attain its vibrancy? What were Shakespeare, Socrates, the 18th century philosophers of liberalism, if they were not disruptive? Even the Great Books curriculum, a creature of the early 20th century, was a self consciously modern and deliberately disruptive intervention against the dominance of the Greek and Latin "classics" (Gottfried, 1991; Menand, 1994). Contrary to the spirit of the historical Canon, today's proponents of the Canon set out to preserve it in aspic.

Nor was the Canon ever quite so single minded as the proponents of the Canon would have us believe. It is just too easy and too simplistic to accuse various discipline based scholarships or schools of thought of throwing out the

Canon as an object of study. Kimball complains that "more and more, one sees the traditional literary Canon ignored as various interest groups demand that there be more women's literature for feminists, black literature for blacks, gay literature for homosexuals, and so on" (1991, p. xv). This is far from being the case. As often as these scholars are open to the new and to the literatures that have been marginalised by the ideology of the Canon, they still read the tests Bloom and others locate within the Canon. To stay with the literature example, their argument is that the margins are always immanent in the core of the Canon, both in the regular and often pointedly problematic appearance of the 'other' and in the way the cultural 'self' is defined against the 'other.' Even absences can be immanent presences. So, Edward Said reads the Orientalism in Canonical Western texts as a mutually defining, alternately centring and marginalising, relationship of Europe to its East (1978); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick reads a continuity from the male homosocial (male solidarity) to the male homosexual in the literary Canon (1985); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak reads the Canon both for its reflections on gender and for the relationship it posits to the Third World (1987).

The contemporary proponents of the Canon are asking that it be restored to its proper place. They are saying that we must look at the Canon on its own ostensible terms. More to the point, they are saying that we should look at the Canon only on terms (again, circularly) that do not contradict their narrowly circumscribed definition of what is, *ex post facto,* Canonical. Insofar as the margins are immanent in European consciousness ("we" are civilised by comparison with "them"); insofar as men inhabit the Canon in relationships with women and other men; insofar as blacks as well as whites appear – and so on – their own reading of their own Canon is ahistorical and opportunistic. At root, the defenders of the idea of the Canon want to enforce their own socially and politically motivated reading, a reading that expunges the contradictions, the disruptions, the revealing lacunae, that are to be found even in those texts they would wholeheartedly agree to be Canonical.

If we must have something like a Canon as a way of rationalising what is taught, surely this Canon does not have to be circumscribed by personal agreement with any or all of what its texts have to say. Herein lies the essential illiberalism of the contemporary proponents of the Canon, masquerading dishonestly as a defence of liberalism. You have a perfect right to find what deconstructionists, poststructuralists, Marxists, or semioticians have to say uncongenial without denying that they have a right to speak, and without wanting to expunge the fact that, for better or for worse, they have become important parts of the Western intellectual life in the closing decades of the 20th century. Perhaps

paradoxically, and whatever its intellectual and political strengths and weaknesses, the culture of postmodernism under which rubric many of the new scholars might loosely place themselves, pays more respect to the Canon than some earlier, modern liberalisms. The modernists wanted to break with the past. They emphasised newness, progress, originality, and purity of linguistic or technological form. The postmodernists stress the intertextual, recuperation of the past through cultural and historical reference, and the impurity of language and technique as products of history and culture.

Nationalism

You might think that Allan Bloom is talking about the Great Books of the West in this phrase from *The Closing of the American Mind*: "... one of the highest and most extreme achievements of the rational quest for the good life according to nature" – but no, the quotation begins with "The United States is" (Bloom, A., 1987, p. 39). The proponents of the Canon do not simply refer to nationalism in the abstract; nor are they talking about the generalities of Western Culture. They lace their arguments with a goodly dose of nationalism. "The plain and inescapable fact is that the derived Western European culture of American life produced the highest degree of prosperity in the conditions of the greatest freedom ever known on planet Earth," says Richard Bernstein (1994, p. 11).

This is yet another way of circumscribing the Canon. The object is the Western tradition, but somehow 'national' culture proves to be more important than the transnational 'West.' As much as anything, the advocates of Cultural Literacy and the revival of the Canon are neonationialists. To sustain this argument, we first need to discuss the shape and purpose of nationalism.

The historical function of nationalism was to create a unifying sense of kinship. This was so powerful that it could even be used as an injunction to risk giving up your life in war. Against the ever present background of differential ethnic and language background, social class, and gender experience, the project of nationalism was to create a fictive sense of cultural homogeneity based on the metaphor of kin. The geographical spread of this imagined kin was meant to be coterminous with the boundaries of the nation state. Cultural difference was supposed to start on the other side of the border. Such as they were, immigrant or indigenous differences were temporary aberrations, resolved by the process of assimilation.

Nationalism is a peculiarly modern phenomenon, linked to the logistics of the establishment of the nation state of industrial society. No longer is everyday life for most people tied primarily to locality and kinship. In the course of their lives

and work in industrial society, people constantly have to communicate with other people they do not know, in ways that are explicit rather than context dependent. The state has to play an active cultural role in this new society, codifying 'standard,' official languages and promoting a sense of cultural homogeneity. Education historically played a crucial role in creating the very practical and useful myths of nationalism. The modern nation state, nationalist ideologies, and institutionalised education, not coincidentally, all emerge at much the same time (Castles, Cope, Kalantzis, & Morrissey, 1992). Gellner calls the process of modern schooling "exo-socialization." Nationalism "conquers in the name of a putative folk culture," yet "it involves the generalised diffusion of school-mediated, academy supervised idiom, codified for the requirements of reasonably precise bureaucratic and technological communication." In preindustrial societies, socialisation had been local and within the kinship group. "The imperative of exo-socialization is the main clue to why the state and culture must now be linked"(Gellner, 1983, pp. 56, 37).

In its content, the curriculum of modern nationalism attempted to assimilate those it found inconveniently different, incompatible with the projects of industry and nation state. In its form, it aimed at discipline. The contents of literacy, such as traditional grammar and a newly fabricated literary Canon, were not so important in themselves. More important was the lesson that one should be a disciplined receptacle of dictated, singular, facts and cultural truths. In its form, in other words, the modern nationalist curriculum was more than a metaphor for social order. It was a tool for its cultural construction.

The idea of the Canon is just as modern as the 'nation' of institutionalised education. It performs a very modern cultural function. It specifies a singular national culture as the objective of schooling and it uses a pedagogy of received Truth to impose its cultural order and maintain its boundaries. It is no accident, then, that the contemporary fracas about PC and the status of the Canon should be powerfully based on neonationalist arguments targeted at schooling and higher education. Allan Bloom waxes on:

> This is the American moment in world history, the one for which we shall forever be judged. Just as in politics the responsibility for the fate of freedom in the world has devolved upon our regime, so the fate of philosophy in the world has devolved upon our regime, and the two are related as they have never been before. (Bloom, A., 1987, p. 382)

This is hardly the stuff of political disengagement. The Canon and the teaching the Canon are the backbone of Bloom's prescription for the cultural salvation of the American elite, for the reconstruction of nation in the face of fragmentation.

In Hirsch's work the concept of nation and the ideology of nationalism are just as prominent. "Only by piling up specific, communally shared information can children learn to participate in complex and cooperative activities with other members of their community," he says. This is because "much in verbal communication is necessarily vague, whether we are conversing or reading. What counts is our ability to grasp the general shape of what we are reading and to tie it to what we already know." Cultural Literacy involves grasping the common culture of nation. "For nation builders, fixing the vocabulary of a national culture is analogous to fixing a standard grammar, spelling and pronunciation." And exactly as the ideologues of nationalism have tried to have us believe for a long time, "national culture ... transcends dialect, region, and social class" (Hirsch, 1988, pp. xv, 14-15, 84, 82).

So education still has a crucial role to play. "The traditional materials of national culture can be learned by all citizens only if the materials are taught in a nation's schools." And, if there was any doubt about the singularity of the Cultural Literacy that Hirsch says is the main aim of schooling, he contrasts his view with that of the advocates of bilingual and multilingual education. "Multilingualism enormously increases cultural fragmentation, civil antagonism, illiteracy, and economic-technological ineffectualness." Again, employing the classical pretence of nationalism, he maintains that "national languages are not ethnic media. Each one is an elaborate composite contrived to overcome local and ethnic dialectal variations inside a large nation." The tone is panicked, as if the proponents of multilingualism ever argued against teaching English in the United States.

> Defenders of multilingualism should not assume that our union has been preserved once and for all by the Civil War, and that we can afford to disdain the cultural and educational vigilance exercised by other modern nations. To think so complacently is to show a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of national literacy in creating and sustaining modern civilization. (Hirsch, 1988, pp. 91, 92-93)

At this point, Hirsch shows himself to be more than vigilant. He lines up with the vigilantes of the English Only movement, with their fear mongering suggestion that significant numbers of people in the United States never want to learn English. He also lines himself up with a popular social atavism that all too many solid citizens are displaying in the face of inexorable demographic shifts.

Hirsch's educational prescription is the old-fashioned, assimilating melting pot. "Shall we aim for the gradual assimilation of all into one national culture or preserve the diverse culture implicit in our hyphenations?" Do Americans call themselves Italo-American, Afro-American, and the like, or do they stick to the

letter of the motto *E Pluribus Unum,* "out of the many, the one." "If we *had* to make a choice between *one* and the *many*, most Americans would choose the principle of unity, since we cannot function as a nation without it" (Hirsch, 1988, pp. 95-96).

It will hardly come as a surprise then, to discover that the horizons of Hirsch's Cultural Literacy lists are limited in some quite particular, nationally predictable ways. His *First Dictionary of Cultural Literacy,* a compendium of what every American child should know by sixth grade, lists 200 items in its literature section. Unless Tarzan qualifies as non-Western, there are only three non-Western entries: the Arabian Nights, Ali Baba, and Aladdin's lamp, the last two cross referenced back to the first. "Native Americans" and even the older term "American Indians" are not even listed in the index to the volume, although a handful of Native American peoples are listed in the "American History to 1865" section. The first date in this same section is 1492, a section which also includes this reference to Columbus: "an Italian explorer who discovered America in 1492" (Hirsch, 1989; Hirsch, Kett, & Treffil, 1988). This last fact is a matter of some dispute, to put it mildly, especially in the vexed context in which Hirsch was writing, in the lead up to the celebrations for the quincentenary of his journey.

Part of the project of Cultural Literacy and of the Great Books curriculum is to inculcate a nationalist ethos once again, to resuscitate symbols of singular nationhood as an antidote to increasing cultural diversity and fragmentation. Harold Bloom fears "Balkanisation," a potent metaphor now often deployed in the defence of national cultural unity. "Finding myself now surrounded by professors of hip-hop; by clones of Gallic-Germanic theory; by ideologues of gender and of various sexual persuasions; by multiculturalists unlimited, I realise that the Balkanisation of literary studies is irreversible" (Bloom, H., 1994, p. 517).

Multiculturalism, Bernstein laments, is evidence that

American elites ... have lost their collective will to require, as a price of admission to the benefits of American life, the acceptance of a common culture, a price that the immigrants are perfectly willing to pay .... This fact flows inevitably from multiculturalism, since, after all, the idea of diversity negates the very existence of a common culture valid for all of us who are already here. (Bernstein, 1994, p. 162)

After discussing the Indian practice of burning widows on their husbands' funeral pyres, he concludes "the reality of culture is something that the ideological multiculturalists would despise, if only they knew what it was." Recognising diversity is less likely to produce "some harmonious ethnic salad" than "a simmering sort of mutual dislike on the level of everyday unpleasantness." He

produces Yugoslavia and Rwanda as handy illustrations of his point (Bernstein 1994, pp. 6-7, 11, 9).

The problem for Henry (1994) is that not all cultures are equally "valid." Henry is prepared to speak plainly on this subject. "Some cultures, though we dare not say it, are more accomplished than others and therefore more worthy of study .... It is scarcely the same thing to put a man on the moon as to put a bone in your nose." There is no guessing which cultures he has in mind when he says that

> a valid culture will lift its people above a subsistence economy and afford the merits of trade and entrepreneurship .... One that fails to fend off invaders, or that permits large numbers of its inhabitants to be taken into slavery, is on its face inferior. (Henry, 1994, pp. 14, 29)

These, then, are all cultural evaluations, in which the dominant culture of the United States stands at the pinnacle of the cultural evolution of humanity. Despite the Canon's pretences to universality, its educational defence is based on nationalism. Its pedagogy is based on the notion that great books embody received Truth which fortify and unify the nation. In these respects, the Canon is a modern invention, historically contingent, and serving an historical purpose – an eminently politically correct purpose, if you like. The agenda of the advocates of the Canon is a return to the traditional educational role of literature teaching. This is but one instrument in the exercise of forcing cultural unity onto the nation state.

At the end of the 20th century, however, the project of traditional nationalism is beginning to come unstuck. Two forces, the one centrifugal and the other centripetal, are together conspiring to make the nation a less and less useful cultural category and principle for cultural unification. On the one hand, globalization means that economic and social relations are increasingly transnational and markets for commodities and culture are less identifiable in national terms. On the other hand, demographic shifts, unprecedented in their scale and accompanied by varieties of ethnic and other identity politics, mean that cultural identification is also tending to be more local and more particular than the nation state. Traditional nationalism may have had its day. Nation states might well have to invent new myths to retain their legitimacy – such as the myth of a pluralism where differences are respected and granted formal equality. In this new cultural framework, each difference is told that it is just as good as the next. This, indeed, may be just as much an historically generated, contingent and opportune cultural project today as was the older nationalist cultural and educational project in its day.

If this reading of today's historical moment is correct, the nationalism of the proponents of the Canon is simply anachronistic – a yearning for the heyday of modern nationalism as we move into postnationalisms of one sort or another. As Europe moves towards economic and political integration, just what would happen if, say, Germany or France were to recycle Allan Bloom's terminology in the quote that begins this section and use it as a guiding principle for its education system?

Cultural Literacy is advocated by Hirsch as an antidote to fragmentation. Yet this kind of antidote – centrally imposed, uniform national self-definition – is only possible in many parts of the world today through repression. The ethnonationalisms of the Balkans which are used as a metaphor of the fearful consequences of diversity, are in fact the reverse: attempts to impose national cultural uniformity on populations that are diverse. *Balkanisation* is not about differences. It is the dangerously futile attempt to create nation states based on common cultural experience. In this sense, the conceptual basis of real Balkanisation is the same as the nationalist proponents of the Canon and Cultural Literacy. Nationalism, in this sense, has by no means had its day. Its consequences are far from productive or peaceful.

In all probability, the sorts of historical pressures nations face at the end of the 20th century can only be negotiated through cultural and pedagogical pluralisms. Pragmatically, no more can one teach a singular nationalism, employ the rhetoric of assimilation, and then expect one's students to become progressively more homogeneous. The paradox of social cohesion today – the business of making well behaved and productive citizens – is that it must be based a new public rhetoric of pluralism. Perhaps the multiculturalists are performing the same social function as the nationalists did in the era of local economies and autonomous nation states. Maybe they are doing the best thing for the nation.

The new nation, the nation in which traditional ideologies of nationalism are often dysfunctional, needs a new Cultural Literacy which includes knowing difference and knowing how to get along with difference, both local difference and global difference. Imagining and inventing nation now requires a different strategy. Some multiculturalisms might be new ways binding the nation for new times. So too, might be some feminisms. And so on, for all the seemingly fragmented particularisms of contemporary cultural life. And all this might happen for the most conservative reasons in the world – to keep the wheels of commerce turning and to respect difference without really doing anything too expensive about differences of social opportunity and access. Even from a conservative point of view, the Canon is probably an unhelpful prescription.

The nationalist Canon was deeply disruptive of older intellectual, cultural, and political orders at the time of its modern invention. Maybe a transformed Canon and a transformed pedagogy will have to be just as creative, just as politically instrumental, and just as disruptive of older dysfunctional nationalisms as was the nationalist Canon in its day.

Truth and Its Learning

Allan Bloom's intellectual enemies are the likes of Derrida, Foucault, and Barthes. They believe that there is "no text and no reality to which the texts refer" because knowledge of texts is turned over to the subjective selves of the interpreter. This, Bloom laments, is "the last, predictable stage in the suppression of reason and the denial of the possibility of truth in the name of philosophy" (Bloom, A., 1987, p. 379).

Traditionally, Bloom says, the university aimed to provide a liberal education and impart genuine knowledge. Politically, its concern was the common good and the understanding of inalienable natural rights. But now, truth is relative. All cultures, all values, all intellectual positions are equally good (hence 'good' is devalued) and worthy of respect. America has become a nation of minorities, indifferent, and passive in relation to each other. Universities strive for nothing more ambitious than that "we should all get along." There are now no standards, no judgment, no serious intellectual debate. In the contemporary strands of literary criticism that Bloom abhors, for example, Great Books lose their greatness by fiat of epistemological relativism.

> Thus the one thing most necessary for us, the knowledge of what these texts have to tell us, is turned over to the subjective, creative selves of these interpreters, who say both that there is no text and no reality to which these texts refer. (Bloom, A., 1987, p. 379)

Tradition is dissolved. Knowledge is all in the reading, in interpretation, a matter of subjectivity. Bloom, however, has a seemingly easy epistemological solution to this problem:

> Of course, the only serious solution is the one that is almost universally rejected: the good old Great Books approach, in which a liberal education means reading certain generally recognized classic texts, just reading them, letting them dictate what the questions are and the method of approaching them – not forcing them into categories we make up, not treating them as historical products, but trying to read them as their authors wished them to be read. (Bloom, A., 1987, p. 344)

Bloom's epistemological manifesto, "as their authors wished them to be read," is one that is now eccentric in the discipline of literary criticism. How can we ever

know what the author wished in order to measure our reading? And do authors or their texts ever simply speak to us in a way that is unmediated by our own readerly interests and experiences? These have become fundamental questions for the discipline, and the answers are mostly more fraught and complex than Bloom's. "I think that the self, in its quest to be free and solitary, ultimately reads with only one aim: to confront greatness." And, in confronting greatness, the truth of the text simply consumes the reader.

Shakespeare heads Harold Bloom's pantheon of Greats.

He renders you anachronistic because he *contains* you; you cannot subsume him. You cannot illuminate him with a new doctrine, be it Marxism or Freudianism or Demanian linguistic skepticism. Instead, he will illuminate the doctrine, not by prefiguration but by postfiguration as it were. (Bloom, H., 1994, pp. 524-525)

After the experience being consumed and after reaching a state of postfiguration, we are left with a something that fills the space of loneliness, and to little civic effect. "Real reading is a lonely activity and does not teach anyone to become a better citizen" (Bloom, H., 1994, p. 519). This rather contradicts Bloom's own deeply political perspective on education, as revealed spirited critique of the politics of readings he doesn't like and the national-civic value of his Canonical alternative.

Hirsch's Cultural Literacy argument is exemplified by:

> Aaron, Hank
> Abandon hope, all ye who enter here
> Abbreviation
> Aberdeen
> Abolitionism
> Abominable snowman
> Abortion
> Absence makes the heart grow fonder

and so the list goes on, "five thousand essential names, phrases, dates and concepts" says the cover of his book. Arguably it was the list more than the argument that attracted the paperback buying public and propelled the book to best seller status. *Cultural Literacy* has an allure similar to that of *Trivial Pursuit*. Better still, Hirsch's compendium of facts purports to list the 5,000 "most essential" bits of knowledge – seemingly a much more serious way of finding out how clever you are than obscure quiz questions about avowedly all-but useless knowledge.

Hirsch originally made his academic mark on the discipline of literary criticism with a book *Validity in Interpretation,* which argued trenchantly against historicism and theories of linguistic indeterminacy: "There is clearly a sense in

which we can neither evaluate a text nor determine what it means 'to us, today' until we have correctly apprehended what it means" (Kimball, 1991, p. 175).

In this regard, Hirsch's view of texts is not that different from Bloom's. Yet his version of truth speaking for itself leads him beyond mere "correct apprehension" a bizarre juxtaposition of cultural shreds and patches in the form of lists of significant facts. His epistemological stance means that he can answer none of the more important questions that educators have been asking in one way or another for the best part of a century. What is the linguistic-cultural basis for pulling all the bits together? How do students learn to generalise, to interpret, to analyse, to critique, and to apply their knowledge? What are the intellectual processes we use to make meaning out of the otherwise random list that is life? And, from a more practical point of view

> Zen
> Zeitgeist
> Zero-sum (game)
> Zeus (Jupiter)
> Zimbabwe
> Zionism
> Zodiac
> Zola, Emile
> Zoning
> Zurich

doesn't exactly read like a workable lesson plan (Hirsch, 1988, p. 215).

Following a similar epistemological and pedagogical bent to Bloom and Hirsch, D'Souza rails against "ethnically determined 'perspectives' ... which condemn ... us to an intellectual and moral universe in which people of different backgrounds can never really hope to understand each other." For students, adding minority perspective means that "instead of Plato's dialogues enlightening them, they now enlighten Plato's dialogues." And D'Souza's answer? He recommends the New Critics from earlier in the 20th century, who "upheld a standard of literary judgment based on the text itself, independent of external influences" (D'Souza, 1991b, pp. 186, 185, 174). This is just another version of the "texts and facts speak for themselves" argument.

The new epistemology of difference and relativity, Siegel chimes in, represents

> an extraordinary reversal of the traditional liberal commitment to a 'truth' that transcends parochialisms. In the new race, class, gender dispensation (class being the least important of the three), universality is replaced by, among other things, feminist science, Nubian numerals (as part of an Afrocentric science), and what Marilyn Frankenstein of the University of

> Massachusetts, Boston, describes as 'ethno-mathematics,' in which the cultural basis of counting comes to the fore. (Siegel, 1991, p. 35)

Philosophically, these defenders of the Canon are promoting just one of the many epistemologies that have appeared in the Western thought of the past two centuries. And they present even this version of the process and knowing in a way that is narrow almost to the point of eccentricity. Very few, even amongst the most strident avatars of conservative intellectual practice working happily within traditional discipline areas, would concur with the idea that the world or the text presents itself to human beings in an unmediated way. Few natural scientists or social scientists would claim that knowledge presents itself unmediated by theory or worldview. There are probably no linguists who would regard language as a neutral conduit for reading texts and their Truths. Most anthropologists now know that their work is a peculiar cultural proclivity, with its own cultural agendas and effects, at least as much as it is a truthful reading of another culture. Most historians locate intellectual movements, literatures, and ideas in social process, not as the expression of universal manifestations of Truth. Only a very few theorists of literature, Bloom, Hirsch, and D'Souza included, would now argue that texts can speak for themselves, uninfluenced by the concerns of their readers. And, to take just three of the seminal radical interventions of the past century, tremendously influential nevertheless in reformulating the Western Canon: the Freudian revolution mounted a critique of the transparency of the motives of consciousness; Nietzsche said that "truth" was contingent upon power; and Marx argued that ideology does not simply tell "truths," but spins opportunistic yarns that promote socioeconomic interests.

Here again, the advocates of the Canon appropriate the Western tradition narrowly and selectively. Nor is their view epistemologically neutral. They have a definite agenda. They want to enforce an epistemology few thinkers now find plausible – one that still pretends there can be unmediated truth. How more "politically correct" can one be than to dictate one epistemological path to Truth?

Flowing directly from this epistemology is a pedagogy of imposed truth, fixed factuality, moral universality, and cultural transmission. Learn the 5000 facts so we have a common culture! Allow yourselves to be consumed by the sublimeness of the Greats! These are slogans for a transmission pedagogy. Just as the epistemology of unmediated Truth is a narrow reading even of the range of epistemologies that might be comfortably located within the Western intellectual tradition, so the pedagogy of transmission is but one of a number of major alternatives which, if Canon is your wont, can be located just as Canonically.

Starting roughly with the early 20th century modernisms of Dewey and Montessori, another pedagogy has entered the Western educational mainstream,

one which is quite antithetical to the traditional curriculum of a classical Canon. In the first instance this pedagogy emphasised progress, process, openness, and change. In its more recent 'postmodern' variants it increasingly emphasises diversity over enforced homogeneity, student voice over the imposed voices of teachers and texts, student activity over passive ingestion of knowledge, learning how to learn over the rote learning of 'facts,' process over content. This is an honourable and now almost century-old line of thought. Nor does it spell the doom of the existing order of things so inevitably as the proponents of the Canon would have us fear. Just as postnationalisms might be in the best interests of a reconstituted nation, so progressivist pedagogies might serve eminently and usefully conservative ends – making students open to exponential technological and cultural change, inculcating the idea that we must live and let live in a world of difference, and using the metaphors of commodity exchange to create the illusion that students own their own knowledge.

Indeed, just as with their nationalism, the advocates of the Canon might simply represent nostalgic regret, based in memories of a past which seems less complicated and less vexing than the present. Their view of education is founded on an epistemology and a pedagogy which will probably prove to be unsustainable in the long term.

Education: Whose Crisis?

The protagonists in the public debates about Cultural Literacy, the status of the Canon and Political Correctness all invoke the spectre of a cultural crisis, a crisis for which, they believe, education must accept much of the blame. They fit comfortably into a broader sweep of opinion that ranges from 'back to basics' populism, to administrators or educational entrepreneurs who think they can breathe life back into education with good, old fashioned free enterprise values, perhaps even going so far as to open 'for profit,' privately owned schools. In other words, they are not isolated texts, but part of a broader move in the politics of education.

The critics, indeed, might be right about cultural crisis, and they might be right about educational crisis, even if it is simultaneously too simplistic and too grandiose to lay the blame for the former on the severity of the latter. And, if anything, these critics are helping the crisis along. Their warning of crisis is in part a self-fulfilling prophecy. They want to create a crisis because they want to reframe the educational agenda to suit their own moral purpose. Indeed, in their frequent moments of rhetorical excess, they are helping precipitate a crisis for the

most crass of politically inspired reasons, whilst using some of the most illiberal and intellectually dishonest tricks to achieve this.

The first trick: We are neutral; they are political. Kimball says that the Canon is above politics. In literature, for example, it is based on an "idea of literary quality that transcends the contingencies of race, gender and the like" (Kimball, 1991, p. xv). Similarly, against the politicisation of curriculum that comes with social critique, such as the critique of institutional racism, D'Souza argues that the "basic systems of American society" are neutral. "These systems – such as democracy, the free market, due process, and so on – are largely procedural and intended to establish a neutral framework that allows all citizens to pursue happiness and safeguard their rights" (D'Souza, 1991b, pp.185-186). This sounds suspiciously like the language of the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights, highly value charged documents. For their positive value assumptions, compare them even with some other, still solidly Western, European systems, such as feudal England, fascist Germany, or Napoleonic France. For their negative value silences and their consequences, examine the arguments of those proposing new amendments to the Bill of Rights, people who certainly do not consider the rights granted by the "American systems" innocently procedural in their operation.

Take D'Souza's idea of academic truth, too. Of the 'Afrocentric' curriculum at Howard University, he says:

> Even if it were deemed necessary for blacks to adopt a mythic view of their past, elaborating such a myth should not be the task of the university .... The university cannot engage in such an undertaking without repudiating its fundamental purpose: the disinterested pursuit of truth. (D'Souza, 1991b, p. 120)

And this is the African truth, as far as D'Souza is concerned: "human sacrifice, tribal warfare, executions, female circumcision, infanticide and primitive medicine" (D'Souza, 1991b, p. 121). How easy it seems to be able to juxtapose the neutrality of our Truth against myths and primitivisms that evidently bring with them all sorts of highly charged abominations. If this sort of connection can be so simply established, the Truth that the 'Eurocentric' brings with it includes in the last couple of centuries human abominations which make the 'Afrocentric' look like a cultural sanctuary.

D'Souza also discusses neutrality in relation to the revamped Stanford "Cultures, Ideas, Values" course sequence. The new curriculum, he claims, doesn't really mean teaching other cultures at all. One of the books to be studied is *I, Rigoberta Menchu.* This is the story, as the subtitle says, of "An Indian Woman in Guatemala." first published 1983. The woman who is its subject does

not write. Instead, her words are transcribed and translated by the French feminist writer Elisabeth Burgos-Debray. The text narrates how Rigoberta Menchu rebels against Europeanised Latino culture to become a feminist and a Marxist. "While it would be unrealistic to expect someone who knows little about Indian culture to teach the Upanishads," concludes D'Souza, "the Stanford faculty was generally quite happy to teach *I, Rigoberta Menchu,* since the latter represents, not the zenith of Third World achievement but rather caters to the proclivities of American activists." By this sort of ideological process, the activists expunge all the sexism and racism in non-Western cultures: foot binding, purdah, widow burning, and the like. This D'Souza disingenuously calls a new cultural imperialism, the imposing of Western ideological prejudices (D'Souza, 1991b, pp. 71, 74, 79, 81).

But what is D'Souza really saying? Does he want cultural imperialism or does he want foot binding? Does he not have cultural proclivities? Just what does he mean by the Canon? "It does not appear the function of the academy to hold group referenda on which books are worth reading, or which authors represent racial constituencies – this would transform the intellectual agenda of the universities into a political one" (D'Souza, 1991b, p. 85). Yet it seems abundantly clear that D'Souza's agenda is a political and a cultural one. Bloom similarly catches himself out when he argues that a relativist frame of mind is in reality a Western prejudice. Picking up on the same example as D'Souza, he claims that it is particularly dishonest to meet with cultural respect an absolutist and prejudiced culture which burns widows on funeral pyres. Maybe. But is Bloom's position beyond prejudices of his own? What does it mean to be opposed both to funeral pyres and to relativism? And how would Bloom ever be able to know whether his Canon had any cultural prejudices if it can only be read for what it professes to be saying?

The second trick: We believe in free speech and intellectual openness; they oppose free speech and intellectual closure. D'Souza quotes Harvard's vocal Law Professor, Alan Dershowitz: "although the far right in America has been the traditional enemy of the First Amendment, some of the greatest dangers to freedom of speech today are being posed by elements of the left." Here is D'Souza: "instead of liberal education, what American students are getting is its diametrical opposite, an education in closed-mindedness and intolerance, which is to say, illiberal education" (D'Souza, 1991b, pp. 144, 229). And, leading the attack is no less a politically disinterested observer than President George Bush. As quoted earlier, he complained that the "notion of political correctness ... declares certain topics off limits, certain expressions off limits." It "attempts to

micro manage casual conversation," to "crush diversity in the name of diversity" (quoted in Cockburn, 1991, p. 1). The imagery is Orwellian.

Yet even these defenders of free speech know that some things can't be said, or at least said publicly. As a student, D'Souza was editor of the *Dartmouth Review,* founded in 1980 as an off-campus student paper, the first of 50 such papers that have since been started. They stay off campus so they can keep to their own straight and narrow political path. On the day before Yom Kippur, 1990, a quote from Hitler's *Mein Kampf* appeared under the masthead of the *Dartmouth Review.* Embarrassed, the editor of the *Review* explained this was an act of sabotage (Almasi, 1991, p. 478). As many copies as possible were retrieved and destroyed. Perhaps, even the publishers of the *Review* would have to admit there are some things that cannot be said freely and with impunity. Similarly, in *Tenured Radicals,* Kimball goes to an enormous amount of trouble to uncover a Nazi and anti-Semitic past in the early writings of Yale deconstructionist Paul de Man (Kimball, 1991, pp. 96-115). But, what's the fuss, if one is an unqualified supporter of free speech?

D'Souza accuses the University of Michigan of new censorship for its policy on Discrimination and Discriminatory Harassment, formulated as a result of a number of disturbing racist incidents. (Had Bush's speech writers been enlightened by D'Souza's 'revelations' in preparation for his commencement speech in which he brought the subject up?) This was one of the incidents: a student walks into a room and finds written on the board "Support the K.K.K. College Fund. A mind is a terrible thing to waste – especially on a nigger" (D'Souza, 1991b, pp. 141-142, 125). Is D'Souza really defending this sort of right to 'free speech'? What must the student who wrote the slogan have felt as he or she heard Bush warn of the threat to free speech coming from those who would like to "micro manage casual conversation"? Is this the sort of diversity of opinion Bush wanted to preserve, to avoid crushing diversity in the name of diversity?

Let's examine, too, the 'free speech' techniques used by these defenders of free speech. Their method seems to be: say it often enough; say it simply enough; say it loudly enough, and the mud will stick. One scrap of paper, circulated at Smith College, amongst the millions of bits of paper to be found across thousands of campuses, asked people to watch for various forms of discrimination. It warned against ageism, heterosexism, ableism (the oppression of the differently abled by the temporarily abled), and lookism (evaluating people by their appearance). For London, this is evidence of the never ending search for euphemisms on the part of "the thought controllers." The same scrap of paper is mentioned over and over again in the public debate over Political Correctness (Bernstein, 1994, pp. 24-25; Kors, 1991, p. 490; London, 1991, p. 475; Rothman, 1991, p. 467; Siegel, 1991,

p. 38).   A few anecdotes, told over an over again, do not add up to an intellectually respectable case. Hyperbole becomes a way of silencing people who dare say things that might sound silly.

And when it comes to thought police, it seems the new insurgents have organised their own agents to work in ways which are less than respectful of others' right to speak freely. Accuracy in Academia, publisher of the monthly *Campus Report*, plants people in the classes to report on incidents of Political Correctness. The National Association of Scholars monitors academic goings on from the point of view of the anti-PC professors. And amongst the new student papers, the *Dartmouth Review* pilloried a Black professor at Dartmouth until he resigned (Almasi, 1991, p. 478). In the same vigilant spirit, *Campus,* published by the Intercollegiate Studies Institute, promoted innocuously as "America's Student Newspaper," persistently attacks deconstruction, multiculturalism, feminism, and a host of other evils. It is impossible to get the impression from any of these interventions that different points of view are valued, even as evidence of others exercising their right to free speech.

Then there's a larger argument about the very concept of free speech and its political usages. The proposition that there should be some restrictions on speech is not some idle whim of the politically correct. Since the end of the Cold War there has been a proliferation of racist hate and racist violence on a scale not seen since the end of the Second World War. We have seen the rise of explicitly racist political movements, from Le Pen's National Front in France, to Zhrinovski's Liberal Democrats in Russia, to the genocidal politics of ethnonationalism in Yugoslavia. Historical and contemporary evidence clearly shows that prejudice can slide from publicly expressed attitudes into active discrimination, then violent attacks, then systematic extermination. There is an unprecedented danger in this situation. The Cold War contest of capitalism and communism is over. The vacated space has been taken by a politics of nation, culture, and identity. At its extremes, this new politics poses a very real threat to peace and stability, from suburban neighbourhoods to global geopolitics. Vilification is not an issue of freedom of speech, a matter of insignificance compared to sticks and stones.

Many countries around the world have enacted racial vilification legislation, they take the threat so seriously. In perhaps the most important international case testing racial vilification legislation, James Keegstra, an Alberta high school teacher was convicted for describing Jews to the children in his classes as treacherous, subversive, sadistic, money lovers, power hungry, and child killers – and then marking students according to how well they repeated his views.

In these sorts of contexts, the free speech argument is deceptive. One of the fundamental difficulties in the working of the First Amendment in the United

States is the dividing line between speech and action. Legislators can freely restrict action, of course. If you couldn't legislate for action you couldn't legislate at all. But the problem is that speech itself is action; speech is almost always a part of action; speech is a predictor of action. There is no conduct separable from speech; there are no actions separable from thoughts. This connection between speech and action is the reason why we accept so many restrictions on free speech, and why we legally interrogate speech as it relates to thoughts, and thoughts as they relate to action. Obscenity, defamation, false advertising, indecent language, offensive behaviour, conspiracy, incitement, contempt of court, pornography – these are all speech crimes. And in examining indictable action, speech always provides critical evidence of intent. In all of these instances, the crucial question is the nature of the social action for which speech provides evidence. James Keegstra was not just a speaker. He was a social actor, inflicting public and personal injury.

So, it's not that speech is without consequence. It's just that the consequences of this particular speech – racial vilification – is something that the critics of PC have discounted as unimportant. They either take a 'sticks and stones' approach, 'words can never ...,' or they say that racial vilification is just another commodity that needs to be allowed to trade freely in the marketplace of ideas. The issue here is not the restriction, because speech is legally restricted so often. The issue is one of priorities, of what words they think don't hurt, what words people will be allowed to trade, and who needs what sort of protection.

And the third trick of intellectual dishonesty used by the opponents of PC and the advocates of the Canon: We are supporters of the highest, most impartial educational ideals; they play upon emotions and make lowly political appeals. On the contrary, the people who point accusingly at PC have their own powerful political agenda. Any person working in higher education could be excused for viewing the following not atypical statements as expressions of blanket hostility. One magazine, editorialising on the spate of books on higher education, interprets the gist of the argument this way: "In summary, the criticisms seem to be: that the professoriate and academia are fat, lazy, and hollow" (Editorial, *The World and I*, 1991). Kimball says that academics are the "privileged beneficiaries of the spiritual and material achievements of our history who, out of perversity, ignorance or malice, have chosen to turn their backs on the culture that nourished them" (Kimball, 1991, p. 207). What better reasons could you have to argue for cuts in education? Make them work harder, stick to the basics and, rather than try new ideas, do what the taxpayers want. It is hard to see the intellectual assault as unrelated to the taxpayer revolt. And if we want to work on emotive, political

appeal, tell the customers, the parents who can afford to pay the fees, that they are not getting their money's worth.

> After all, what can a parent spending $25,000 a year to send Johnny to an 'elite' college possibly think when his son comes home to tell him that he is a bourgeois pig, that psycho-babble is to be preferred to straightforward conversation, that democracy is a fiction created from a mythical Western tradition, and that a Eurocentric bias in our culture has deprived people of colour of their roots. Are these reasons to put 25,000 after-tax dollars on the barrelhead? (London, 1991, p. 480)

> Parents and taxpayers paying small fortunes to send their children to the new political chapels of American higher education might well want to ask about the political catechisms and Sunday schools of the new in loco parentis agencies: the official definition of moral agendas; extracurricular 'diversity education;' official group identities; official histories of America; politically determined limitations on free speech; and thought reform to cleanse the young of the sins of their parents, communities and nation. (Kors, 1991, p. 487)

Henry complains that the root of the problem, the reason why a decent, elite education has been abandoned, is that too many students, with too little ability, are moving on to higher education. The curriculum has deteriorated and educational standards fallen as a result of the sorts of political pressures that have been exerted by the education lobby and parents.

> But none of these social pressures justifies spending one hundred and fifty billion dollars a year overeducating a populace that is neither consistently eager for intellectual expansion of horizons nor consistently likely to gain the economic and professional status for which the education was undertaken .... My modest proposal is this. Let us reduce, over perhaps a five-year span, the number of high school graduates who go on to college from nearly sixty percent to a still generous thirty-three percent. (Henry, 1994, pp. 164-165)

These sorts of appeals are hardly impartial in their political analysis, nor do they display a great deal of purely educational idealism.

Reworking the Canon

These, then are the real dimensions of the fracas surrounding Cultural Literacy, the Canon, and Political Correctness. The provocateurs in the debate create the fiction of an alliance amongst intellectual strains that are in fact extremely varied, possessing more differences than similarities and realistically more often in opposition to each other than they are in agreement. They reconstruct in the guise of tradition a Canon which is narrowly selective and eminently suitable for their own cultural, epistemological and educational agendas. They purvey, in fact, a

cultural nationalism which is anachronistic. And, in the name of free speech and disinterested academic exchange, they put their case in ways designed to restrict the speech of those whose message they do not like, based on a quite transparent political program.

Yet they are not to be dismissed unequivocally. As much as they wilfully distort the truth in the name of Truth, the proponents of the Canon also read some aspects of the current intellectual and educational situation perceptively. Take, for example, the issue of fragmentation of the curriculum. This is, indeed, a distinct problem. In one of her forays into the debate, historian of education Diane Ravitch points to the problems of what she calls particularism: courses in ethnic studies, for example, that set out to 'raise the self-esteem' of minorities, that are based on lineages of 'blood' or 'race memory,' and which thereby run the risk of fanning ancient hatreds (Ravitch, 1990a; 1990b). Setting aside her careless phraseology and exaggeration, Ravitch has a point. Even if we are sympathetic with the substantive intellectual questions existing in particularistic courses, these sometimes sow the seeds of their own defeat. In their nature, they often fail to articulate with the mainstream; they allow institutions to appear on paper to be facing the challenge of diversity, when in fact these courses are tokens, relegated to the margins of the curriculum. This is not just the result of institutional prejudice. The problem goes to the very roots of the way these new areas of inquiry frequently construct knowledge – an epistemological relativism that privileges voice and experience over critique, engagement, and synthesis.

Indeed, the new philosophies of difference, even though they try to raise the esteem and the status of those who have historically been marginalised, themselves marginalise in a variety of ways. All too often, they use categories that make differences immutable by naturalising them. 'Race' becomes a biological category rather than an ideological construction of 'racism.' Ethnicity is explained in terms of sociobiology. The expression 'People of Colour' is used. But what does this really mean in a sociological, operational sense? What does colour itself do in the world, as opposed to the cultural ascriptions of significance to colour?

Ironically, these categories of difference homogenise in ways that are as insensitive and inaccurate as any assimilationist melting pot. And, having aggregated the 'other,' they are able keep its difference at a distance. It can be argued that 'colour,' to stay with the same example, is a grossly homogenising cultural construction which only serves to delineate the sum of 'us' from the some of 'them.' What does 'minority' mean in a country where 14% of the population is of English background, the largest ancestry group? How can 'Hispanic' be used as a valid generic category? Who is 'White' and how can 'Whites' be seen to be

a singular cultural group in any sense? Why is one group in this population routinely called 'African Americans' while another group is just 'Americans'? What is specifically African about 'African Americans,' and why, when Africa is such a large and diverse place, are we more reluctant to lump Irish Americans and Greek Americans into one category? Rather ironically, perhaps, these flaws in the terminology of difference are in part a legacy of the naming practices of the Canon itself.

At a more fundamental level than terminology, philosophies of difference play an active part in recreating, resurrecting, or reconstituting cultural difference. In so doing, however, they distance by keeping the 'other' exotic. Who's ethnic and who's not? 'Ethnic' ends up connoting the folkloric. By fiat of tolerance, these sorts of differences are formally equalised. Differences, however, are not innocent. They also embody patterns of social inequity. Difference can be the basis of an innocuous pluralism that supersedes the myths of equal individual opportunity/unequal individual industry and ability. It replaces them with the more plausible pluralist myths of formal equality of differences. It is as if different social outcomes are no more than the expression of different cultural inclinations, which, as choice, are equally worthy of respect. In practical terms, the struggle for the recognition of difference may be no more than a small opening into the realm of social privilege for historically excluded groups. It is a tokenistic opening which allows the system to pride itself in being non-discriminatory. None of the opponents of multiculturalism go this far in their critique of the philosophies of difference. But, in moments of populist opportunism, they do come at least halfway to highlight the contradictions in this sort of pluralism.

The attack on Political Correctness also makes a certain kind of sense. It is true that those who proscribe racism, sexism, and other discriminatory practices often use a method of teaching which is naively moralistic. Moralism, however, is poor pedagogy. Injunctions of the order "thou shalt not use offensive language" and affective approaches to the issue of discrimination can be simply inflammatory. They do not address the very practical threat these issues pose, especially to those people the pedagogies most want to influence. It only makes sense that people will defend what they believe to be their own perceived interests. The solution is not so simple as to demand a change of heart and a change of wording. Preaching tolerance will simply be ineffectual. Against the feigned political agnosticism of the opponents of PC, all education has the potential to influence its students profoundly. But it influences them most profoundly when it is sensitive to where they come from, their needs, interests, and identities.

In broader pedagogical terms, too, Hirsch may well be right about the importance of common knowledge and shared associations, as well as the importance of content in curriculum. Nation, however, is an increasingly anachronistic category for the selection of content. Perhaps ironically, the defenders of the Canon present more of a danger to the possibility of there being a common knowledge, from the caste implications in Bloom's and Henry's elitism to the immediate pedagogical naivete and ultimate bad faith of traditional, transmission pedagogies.

Yet a progressivist pedagogy of diversity, choice, needs, relevance, difference, and ownership of one's own knowledge could just as much reproduce inequities of social access simply by avoiding, again in the name of difference, the question of what are the linguistic, cognitive, and cultural preconditions for equitable social access. Traditional curriculum sorted by ability and then was brutally frank about its own agenda – it failed students. The new tracking mechanisms are less honest. They say, "you have succeeded in your cultural difference." The promise of the traditional curriculum of the classical Canon was assimilation. Perhaps it never really meant what it said, in the proper sense of giving 'them' all the cultural privileges that 'we' have. Pedagogically and culturally, traditional curriculum was insensitive and inappropriate to the backgrounds and interests of most students, and conveniently labelled the consequence of this, after the event, lack of individual ability. But with progressivist pedagogy we do not even have a rhetoric that we can take at its own word. We do not have a rhetoric against which we can measure educational inequities. Difference is just difference, and that's life. Small curriculum concessions to multicultural content – the folkloric variety and framed by an anthropological distance – mask the fact that there is little access for students whose cultural background is not the dominant one. Admission or employment quotas and curriculum change might be little more than window dressing. They might serve as proof of nondiscrimination in much the same way that instances of mobility have always been used as proof of socioeconomic equality of opportunity. Ironically, philosophies of difference can serve the social mission of the Canon at least as well as the revivalists' idealised curriculum, by convincing people that difference is just difference, to be respected and valued.

This critical reading of some multicultural education and progressivist pedagogy is obviously not the same as that of the enemies of PC and the friends of the Western Canon. Yet it does concede that some of their observations are half perceptive. But if their vision of a resuscitated Canon is a less than helpful alternative, just what do we do?

We should meet new *particularisms* with a more genuine scepticism – in a spirit that welcomes the stimulation and the debate that arises from nonconformity. This is historically how new paradigms are given the chance to test themselves, eventually either to wither or to flourish. It is also how old paradigms are sharpened to meet the challenge of new times. In any area of intellectual innovation, students and their teachers need time and space to think things through and to establish new paradigms. The history of women's studies is a case in point. Feminist perspectives would never have developed so fully had mainstream courses and traditions of research been the only available avenues. If particularism is an affront to traditional academic ethics, an instance of doctrinal faith rather than genuine intellectual interaction, surely it needs to be remembered that specialisation and exploring the world using an intellectual paradigm are characteristic academic tools of the trade. To an outsider, elementary particle physics or palaeontology involve just as powerful doctrinal faiths as the most particularistic of the new particularisms (Kalantzis & Cope, 1992). If you are serious about intellectual freedom and free speech, you have to leave space for experimentation, and space for mistakes, in order to allow some new successes.

The Canon's pretensions to fixity and universality, in fact, have done more to create these particularisms than wilful self marginalisation ever has. The absences in the Canon and the exclusionary processes at work in Canonical readings have only left a marginalised space for other readings and other texts. They become the creatures of the limitations in the Canon itself. From a more positive point of view, particularisation and relativisation can be seen as a strategic move. If they succeed first in breaking the universal pretensions of the Canon, they might then be in a position to transform it.

Rather than leave difference as difference, the cultural margins have the positive potential to reconstitute the core, be that through reworking the idea of nation away from the traditional homogenising, assimilationist, ideologies of nationalism, or by allowing the Canon to be open to disruption, debate, and revision. Perhaps the word Canon has been sullied by its ostensible supporters to the point where it is no longer useful, denoting as it now does stasis, politicised selectivity, and an epistemology of textual reverence in the guise of the transparency of reading. Curriculum, nevertheless, still needs to broker cultural contents. It always has to operate under more or less conscious principles of selectivity.

So, there are three ways to go. The first is the classical Western Canon, preserved in aspic. The second is a dissipated, decentred, socially quiescent pluralism which denies the very possibility of generalisable principles of selection.

This represents no direct challenge to the Canon, as each intellectual bent pursues its own projects with its own epistemologies and never the twain shall meet. While the Canon ossifies, the particularisms stay quietly doing their thing on the margins. The third way is to allow the Canon to move, to allow that intellectual and cultural challenge, critique, interventions from the margins, contemporary perspicacity, and movement are principles of curriculum selection. These principles are just as important as the status that has subsequently accrued to those notable historical interventions that are now Canonical and which made their impact in their own time as a result of just this sort of dynamism. The margins, in other words, could renegotiate the Canon. They could challenge the terms of the cultural mainstream.

At the end of the 20th century there is an intellectual vibrancy and brilliance to marginality that forces the Canon to keep moving. Why is it that *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Midnight's Children* are two of the great novels of the late 20th century? Why is it that multiculturalism is arousing such passionate debate in schools and in higher education? A good deal of the cultural vitality in the West may well now be coming, not from old citadels of culture in the metropolitan heartlands, but from the minds and voices of those beating at the doors. Listen to these voices of particularism. They might also be saying something that particularises the old Canon. It may well be that the Canon is being transformed to a significant extent by particularisms which are not of Western Culture, but of its margins, of groups that have historically found themselves outside its cultural boundaries, yet which have been buffeted nevertheless by its imperial predilections.

The solution to the multicultural dilemma is not in learning about other cultures in the fashion of a travelogue commentary, or by constructing the exotic, the different, the separate, the distant. We don't just need courses on hitherto neglected civilisations, but a whole new epistemology and a reconstituted Canon. For example, we need to redefine historical studies as a global thing, shedding the blinkers of a country-by-country historiography so that it becomes more aware of history as transnational process. We need to redefine the specialist sociologies of minorities which focus on the supposed inner realities of race or culture. Multiculturalism is not just about the fragments. It is a process, a relationship in which the fragments and the dominant mutually define and operationalise the cultural events that fall under the categories race and ethnicity. With a new epistemology, the exotic will appear ordinary and the critical question of cultural diversity will be central to all our identities and existences, not a marker of distance and marginality.

A postprogressivist pedagogy, at the same time, would build on the insights of progressivism by using differential pedagogies. It would start with students' differential experiences. But at the same time, its objective would be a commonality which did not exclude difference. It would not be inclined to force homogenisation around singular cultural principles such as nationalism. Nevertheless, to concur in part with the principles underlying Hirsch's idea of Cultural Literacy, schooling cannot provide social access with a fragmented curriculum which leaves difference as difference. There are common linguistic, cognitive, and cultural conditions for access to social goods. Albeit by means of differential, specialised pedagogies, this access should be the singular objective of curriculum. An acceptance of the salience of difference, in fact, is an essential pedagogical precondition to achieving these singular ends. This reconstituted pedagogy would need to shunt back and forth between increasingly important parochial differences and a supracommunity that is genuinely inclusive in what it privileges – its symbols, and access to wealth and power.

A postprogressivist pedagogy would also need to move beyond moralism about discrimination. Diversity and its less than innocent social consequences need to be addressed empirically, conceptually, and above all, in an atmosphere of careful intellectual inquiry. Core curriculum, for example, might address historical issues of gender and culture. It might allow students to use the language they like, so long as they know what it means historically. At the same time, it is quite right and proper that speech is not left completely unrestricted. There are some things that simply should not be published or said in public spaces, such as educational institutions.

Conclusion

The PC debate has certainly struck a chord. This chord is a sense of impending cultural crisis, a crisis that the anti-PC people claim might already be well and truly with us. They believe education is one of the root causes of the crisis. Their critique starts with the cultural contents of curriculum, ravaged as it seems to be by relativism, fragmentation, specialisation, and a fixation with contemporary social issues. In response they demand that the Canon of Western Culture and national Cultural Literacy be restored to their proper, ennobling places. With their powerful yearning for cultural renewal also comes a good dose of nationalism. Reinstating a Canon of 'What Every American Needs to Know' is supposed to be some sort of antidote to the rot that has evidently set in with the ascent of multiculturalism, feminism, deconstruction, and a shopping list of other intellectual and social bogeys. There is more to this than restating the worthy cultural contents of curriculum. It also comes with claims about the nature of

knowledge, the status of Truth, and, as a consequence, the most appropriate sort of pedagogy. Given that it is singular and received Truth which defines the cultural commodity most worthy of transaction in the educational marketplace, then the means of educational exchange has to be transmission on the part of teachers and reception on the part of students.

But if the advocates of the Western Canon don't like some strains in late 20th century intellectual life and educational thought, if they are nostalgic for the thought and schools of thought of times past, this does not give them an automatic right to impose their own exclusionary version of political correctness. And, if they feel there is a cultural crisis, they should not simplistically attribute this to educational innovation. When the educational innovations leave something to be desired, it is probably a function of cultural crisis – the consequence of a broader social failure to come to grips with diversity – than the other way around. The advocates of the Canon should refocus their energies instead on the society that not only creates the Canon but which, in other contradictory moments, challenges it as well.

So why the noise? If the 'PC police' are not a threat of Robespierrian proportions, and if Western Civilisation is not crumbling as a result, why all the fuss? Why have we become so divided in this ferocious ideological battle? The answers to these questions have to be found in the anxieties generated from the very core of contemporary Western society: globalization and decline of national sovereignty; a growing underclass whose claims are being articulated in new ways, such as identity politics and racially defined subcultures of criminality; global labour flows; the fires of subcultural fragmentation fanned by new information and communications technologies. These are all things with which the people branded by PC and relativistic multiculturalism are all trying to grapple. And, for their part, the proponents of the Canon are reacting to an accusatory politics. People like Rush Limbaugh do not want to wear responsibility for history. They live by their faith that the liberal capitalism of equality of the marketplace will fix it all, just if you give it time. But clearly it doesn't, it hasn't, and it won't.

Meanwhile, in other places within the cultural establishment, political correctness has simply become common sense, and for the most pragmatic of reasons. Microsoft apologised for "grave errors" when the latest Spanish version of its Word thesaurus suggested 'maneater' or 'savage' as alternatives to 'Indian,' 'pervert' for Lesbian; and 'Aryan' or 'civilised' for 'Western.' These would have been perfectly reasonable synonyms in an earlier age (Reuters, 1996). Now they are plain bad for business. And, as the Atlanta Olympics opened, newspaper headlines around the world proclaimed "Let the Politically Correct Olympics

Begin." There were to be minimal references to the Atlanta of *Gone with The Wind,* the Atlanta of racism and prejudice. Any such references would contradict the spirit and purpose of the modern Olympics.

Of course, there are politics to words, politics to ideas, and politics to culture. We always have to be talking about what we are saying, because meanings have effects. We always have to be thinking why we are thinking and what we are thinking for. And culture will always be politics, as we ponder massive cultural shifts and argue with the agents of cultural change as well as the defenders of various pasts. And if it's all political, why would you not want to be, in a certain sense, correct? Correct in this sense might mean apt, relevant, pertinent, or usefully insightful – all political versions of correctness, if only ever provisionally so. In this regard, the real danger in the struggle to be correct does not arise from those trying to read change, but the ideologues of the right who have far less doubt about their correctness than any of the intellectual approaches accused of PC.

This having been said, the provocateurs in this debate are at times right about much of multiculturalism, feminism, poststructuralism, and the other contemporary 'isms.' Much of what counts for theory and curriculum is intellectually shoddy, disappointingly equivocal, and hypocritical as words which do not have the effect they promise on the world they describe. At worst, structural inequities are neutralised as merely relative difference, the 'other' is left on the margins and pedagogy remains naively moralistic. The reality is not just difference, but a struggle over resources and how they get distributed, fairly and equitably. The challenge is not to create fragmentary havens of particularism, but to create a genuinely pluralistic mainstream.

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