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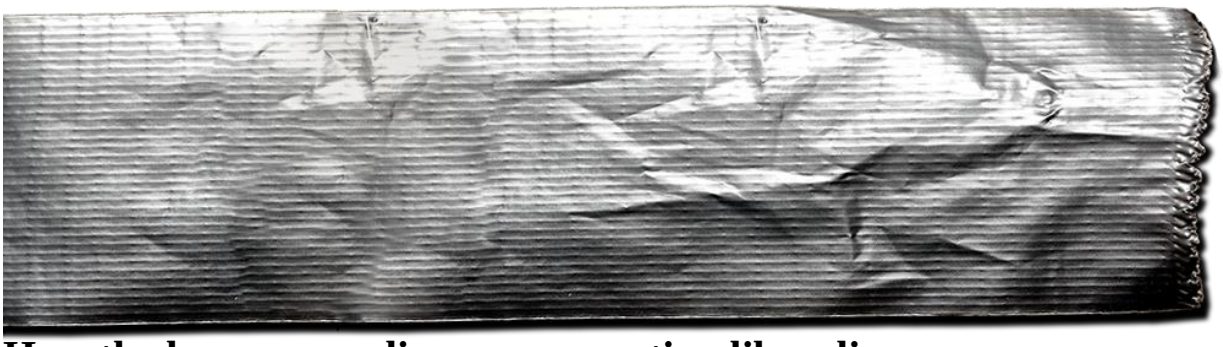
Not a Very P.C. Thing to Say



How the language police are perverting liberalism.

By Jonathan Chait Photographs by Bobby Doherty

Around 2 a.m. on December 12, four students approached the apartment of Omar Mahmood, a Muslim student at the University of Michigan, who had recently published a column in a school newspaper about his perspective as a minority on campus. The students, who were recorded on a building surveillance camera wearing baggy hooded sweatshirts to hide their identity, littered Mahmood's doorway with copies of his column, scrawled with messages like "You scum embarrass us," "Shut the fuck up," and "DO YOU EVEN GO HERE?! LEAVE!!" They posted a picture of a demon and splattered eggs.

This might appear to be the sort of episode that would stoke the moral conscience of students on a progressive campus like Ann Arbor, and it was quickly agreed that an act of biased intimidation had taken place. But Mahmood was widely seen as the perpetrator rather than the victim. His column, published in the school's conservative newspaper, had spoofed the culture of taking offense that pervades the campus. Mahmood satirically pretended to denounce "a white cis-gendered hetero upper-class man" who offered to help him up when he slipped, leading him to denounce "our barbaric attitude toward people of left-handydnyss." The gentle tone of his mockery was closer to Charlie Brown than to *Charlie Hebdo.*

The Michigan Daily, where Mahmood also worked as a columnist and film critic, objected to the placement of his column in the conservative paper but hardly wanted his satirical column in its own pages. Mahmood later said that he was told by the editor that his column had created a "hostile environment," in which at least one *Daily* staffer felt threatened, and that he must write a letter of apology to the staff. When he refused, the *Daily* fired him, and the subsequent vandalism of his apartment served to confirm his status as thought-criminal.

The episode would not have shocked anybody familiar with the campus scene from two decades earlier. In 1992, an episode along somewhat analogous lines took place, also in Ann Arbor. In this case, the offending party was the feminist videographer Carol Jacobsen, who had produced an exhibition documenting the lives of sex workers. The exhibition's subjects presented their profession as a form of self-empowerment, a position that ran headlong against the theories of Catharine MacKinnon, a law professor at the university who had gained national renown for her radical feminist critique of the First Amendment as a tool of male privilege. MacKinnon's beliefs nestled closely with an academic movement that was then being described, by its advocates as well as its critics, as "political correctness." Michigan had already responded to the demands of pro-p.c. activists by imposing a campuswide speech code purporting to restrict all manner of discriminatory speech, only for it to be struck down as a First Amendment violation in federal court.

In Ann Arbor, MacKinnon had attracted a loyal following of students, many of whom copied her method of argument. The pro-MacKinnon students, upset over the display of pornographic video clips, descended upon Jacobsen's exhibit and confiscated a videotape. There were speakers visiting campus for a conference on prostitution, and the video posed "a threat to their safety," the students insisted.

This was the same inversion of victim and victimizer at work last December. In both cases, the threat was deemed not the angry mobs out to crush opposing ideas, but the ideas themselves. The theory animating both attacks turns out to be a durable one, with deep roots in the political left.

The recent mass murder of the staff members of *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris was met with immediate and unreserved fury and grief across the full range of the American political system. But while outrage at the violent act briefly united our generally quarrelsome political culture, the quarreling quickly resumed over deeper fissures. Were the slain satirists martyrs at the hands of religious fanaticism, or bullying spokesmen of privilege? Can the offensiveness of an idea be determined objectively, or only by recourse to the identity of the person taking offense? On Twitter, "Je Suis Charlie," a slogan heralding free speech, was briefly one of the most popular news hashtags in history. But soon came the reactions ("Je Ne Suis Pas Charlie") from those on the left accusing the newspaper of racism and those on the right identifying the cartoons as hate speech. Many media companies, including the New York *Times,* have declined to publish the cartoons the terrorists deemed offensive, a stance that has attracted strident criticism from some readers. These sudden, dramatic expressions of anguish against insensitivity and oversensitivity come at a moment when large segments of American culture have convulsed into censoriousness.

After political correctness burst onto the academic scene in the late '80s and early '90s, it went into a long remission. Now it has returned. Some of its expressions have a familiar tint, like the protesting of even mildly controversial speakers on college campuses. You may remember when 6,000 people at the University of California–Berkeley signed a petition last year to stop a commencement address by Bill Maher, who has criticized Islam (along with nearly all the other major world religions). Or when protesters at Smith College demanded the cancellation of a commencement address by Christine Lagarde, managing director of the International Monetary Fund, blaming the organization for "imperialist and patriarchal systems that oppress and abuse

women worldwide." Also last year, Rutgers protesters scared away Condoleezza Rice; others at Brandeis blocked Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a women's-rights champion who is also a staunch critic of Islam; and those at Haverford successfully protested former Berkeley chancellor Robert Birgeneau, who was disqualified by an episode in which the school's police used force against Occupy protesters.

At a growing number of campuses, professors now attach "trigger warnings" to texts that may upset students, and there is a campaign to eradicate "microaggressions," or small social slights that might cause searing trauma. These newly fashionable terms merely repackage a central tenet of the first p.c. movement: that people should be expected to treat even faintly unpleasant ideas or behaviors as full-scale offenses. Stanford recently canceled a performance of *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* after protests by Native American students. UCLA students staged a sit-in to protest microaggressions such as when a professor corrected a student's decision to spell the word *indigenous* with an uppercase *I* — one example of many "perceived grammatical choices that in actuality reflect ideologies." A theater group at Mount Holyoke College recently announced it would no longer put on *The Vagina Monologues* in part because the material excludes women without vaginas. These sorts of episodes now hardly even qualify as exceptional.

Trigger warnings aren't much help in actually overcoming trauma — an analysis by the Institute of Medicine has found that the best approach is controlled exposure to it, and experts say avoidance can reinforce suffering. Indeed, one professor at a prestigious university told me that, just in the last few years, she has noticed a dramatic upsurge in her students' sensitivity toward even the mildest social or ideological slights; she and her fellow faculty members are terrified of facing accusations of triggering trauma — or, more consequentially, violating her school's new sexual-harassment policy — merely by carrying out the traditional academic work of intellectual exploration. "This is an environment of fear, believe it or not," she told me by way of explaining her request for anonymity. It reminds her of the previous outbreak of political correctness — "Every other day I say to my friends, 'How did we get back to 1991?' "

But it would be a mistake to categorize today's p.c. culture as only an academic phenomenon. Political correctness is a style of politics in which the more radical members of the left attempt to regulate political discourse by defining opposing views as bigoted and illegitimate. Two decades ago, the only communities where the left could exert such hegemonic control lay within academia, which gave it an influence on intellectual life far out of proportion to its numeric size. Today's political correctness flourishes most consequentially on social media, where it enjoys a frisson of cool and vast new cultural reach. And since social media is also now the milieu that hosts most political debate, the new p.c. has attained an influence over mainstream journalism and commentary beyond that of the old.

It also makes money. Every media company knows that stories about race and gender bias draw huge audiences, making identity politics a reliable profit center in a media industry beset by insecurity. A year ago, for instance, a photographer compiled images of Fordham students displaying signs recounting "an instance of racial microaggression they have faced." The stories ranged from uncomfortable ("No, where are you really from?") to relatively innocuous (" 'Can

you read this?' He showed me a Japanese character on his phone"). BuzzFeed published part of her project, and it has since received more than 2 million views. This is not an anomaly.

In a short period of time, the p.c. movement has assumed a towering presence in the psychic space of politically active people in general and the left in particular. "All over social media, there dwell armies of unpaid but widely read commentators, ready to launch hashtag campaigns and circulate Change.org petitions in response to the slightest of identity-politics missteps," Rebecca Traister wrote recently in *The New Republic.*

Two and a half years ago, Hanna Rosin, a liberal journalist and longtime friend, wrote a book called *The End of Men,* which argued that a confluence of social and economic changes left women in a better position going forward than men, who were struggling to adapt to a new postindustrial order. Rosin, a self-identified feminist, has found herself unexpectedly assailed by feminist critics, who found her message of long-term female empowerment complacent and insufficiently concerned with the continuing reality of sexism. One Twitter hashtag, "#RIPpatriarchy," became a label for critics to lampoon her thesis. Every new continuing demonstration of gender discrimination — a survey showing Americans still prefer male bosses; a person noticing a man on the subway occupying a seat and a half — would be tweeted out along with a mocking #RIPpatriarchy.

Her response since then has been to avoid committing a provocation, especially on Twitter. "If you tweet something straightforwardly feminist, you immediately get a wave of love and favorites, but if you tweet something in a cranky feminist mode then the opposite happens," she told me. "The price is too high; you feel like there might be banishment waiting for you." Social media, where swarms of jeering critics can materialize in an instant, paradoxically creates this feeling of isolation. "You do immediately get the sense that it's one against millions, even though it's not." Subjects of these massed attacks often describe an impulse to withdraw.

Political correctness is a term whose meaning has been gradually diluted since it became a flashpoint 25 years ago. People use the phrase to describe politeness (perhaps to excess), or evasion of hard truths, or (as a term of abuse by conservatives) liberalism in general. The confusion has made it more attractive to liberals, who share the goal of combating race and gender bias.

But political correctness is not a rigorous commitment to social equality so much as a system of left-wing ideological repression. Not only is it not a form of liberalism; it is antithetical to liberalism. Indeed, its most frequent victims turn out to be liberals themselves.

I am white and male, a fact that is certainly worth bearing in mind. I was also a student at the University of Michigan during the Jacobsen incident, and was attacked for writing an article for the campus paper defending the exhibit. If you consider this background and demographic information the very essence of my point of view, then there's not much point in reading any further. But this pointlessness is exactly the point: Political correctness makes debate irrelevant and frequently impossible.

Under p.c. culture, the same idea can be expressed identically by two people but received differently depending on the race and sex of the individuals doing the expressing. This has led to elaborate norms and terminology within certain communities on the left. For instance, "mansplaining," a concept popularized in 2008 by Rebecca Solnit, who described the tendency of men to patronizingly hold forth to women on subjects the woman knows better — in Solnit's case, the man in question mansplained her own book to her. The fast popularization of the term speaks to how exasperating the phenomenon can be, and mansplaining has, at times, proved useful in identifying discrimination embedded in everyday rudeness. But it has now grown into an all-purpose term of abuse that can be used to discredit any argument by any man. (MSNBC host Melissa Harris-Perry once disdainfully called White House press secretary Jay Carney's defense of the relative pay of men and women in the administration "mansplaining," even though the question he responded to was posed by a male.) Mansplaining has since given rise to "whitesplaining" and "straightsplaining." The phrase "solidarity is for white women," used in a popular hashtag, broadly signifies any criticism of white feminists by nonwhite ones.

If a person who is accused of bias attempts to defend his intentions, he merely compounds his own guilt. (Here one might find oneself accused of man/white/straightsplaining.) It is likewise taboo to request that the accusation be rendered in a less hostile manner. This is called "tone policing." If you are accused of bias, or "called out," reflection and apology are the only acceptable response — to dispute a call-out only makes it worse. There is no allowance in p.c. culture for the possibility that the accusation may be erroneous. A white person or a man can achieve the status of "ally," however, if he follows the rules of p.c. dialogue. A community, virtual or real, that adheres to the rules is deemed "safe." The extensive terminology plays a crucial role, locking in shared ideological assumptions that make meaningful disagreement impossible.

Nearly every time I have mentioned the subject of p.c. to a female writer I know, she has told me about Binders Full of Women Writers, an invitation-only Facebook group started last year for women authors. The name came from Mitt Romney's awkwardly phrased debate boast that as Massachusetts governor he had solicited names of female candidates for high-level posts, and became a form of viral mockery. Binders was created to give women writers a "laid-back" and "no-pressure" environment for conversation and professional networking. It was an attempt to alleviate the systemic underrepresentation of women in just about every aspect of American journalism and literature, and many members initially greeted the group as a welcome and even exhilarating source of social comfort and professional opportunity. "Suddenly you had the most powerful women in journalism and media all on the same page," one former member, a liberal journalist in her 30s, recalls.

Binders, however, soon found itself frequently distracted by bitter identity-politics recriminations, endlessly litigating the fraught requirements of p.c. discourse. "This was the first time I had felt this new kind of militancy," says the same member, who requested anonymity for fear that her opinions would make her employer uncomfortable. Another sent me excerpts of the types of discussions that can make the group a kind of virtual mental prison.

On July 10, for instance, one member in Los Angeles started a conversation urging all participants to practice higher levels of racial awareness. "Without calling anyone out

specifically, I'm going to note that if you're discussing a contentious thread, and shooting the breeze … take a look at the faces in the user icons in that discussion," she wrote. "Binders is pretty diverse, but if you're not seeing many WOC/non-binary POC in your discussion, it's quite possible that there are problematic assumptions being stated without being challenged." ("POC" stands for "people of color." "WOC" means "women of color." "Non-binary" describes people who are either transgender or identify as a gender other than traditionally male or female.)

Two members responded lightly, one suggesting that such "call-outs" be addressed in private conversation and another joking that she was a "gluten free Jewish WWC" — or Woman Without Color. This set off more jokes and a vicious backlash. "It seems appropriate to hijack my suggestion with jokes. I see," the Los Angeles member replied. "Apparently whatever WOC have to say is good for snark and jokes," wrote another. Others continued: "The level of belittling, derailing, crappy jokes, and all around insensitivity here is astounding and also makes me feel very unsafe in this Big Binder." "It is literally fucking insane. I am appalled and embarrassed."

The suggestion that a call-out be communicated privately met with even deeper rage. A poet in Texas: "I'm not about to private message folks who have problematic racist, transphobic, anti-immigrant, and/or sexist language." The L.A. member: "Because when POC speak on these conversations with snark and upset, we get Tone Argumented at, and I don't really want to deal with the potential harm to me and mine." Another writer: "You see people suggesting that PMs are a better way to handle racism? That's telling us we are too vocal and we should pipe down." A white Toronto member, sensing the group had dramatically underreacted, moved to rectify the situation: "JESUS FUCK, LIKE SERIOUSLY FUCK, I SEE MORE WHITE BINDERS POLICING WOC AND DEMANDING TO BE EDUCATED/UNEDUCATED AS IF IT'S A FUCKING NOBLE MISSION RATHER THAN I DUNNO SPEND TIME SHUTTING DOWN AND SHITTING ON RACIST DOUCHE CANOE BEHAVIOUR; WHAT ARE YOU GAINING BY THIS? WHAT ARE YOU DETRACTING? YOU NEED SCREENCAPS OF BURNING CROSSES TO BELIEVE RACIST SHIT IS HAPPENING? THIS THREAD IS PAINFUL. HUGS TO ALL THE WOC DURING THIS THREAD"

Every free society, facing the challenge of balancing freedom of expression against other values such as societal cohesion and tolerance, creates its own imperfect solution. France's is especially convoluted and difficult to parse: It allows for satire and even blasphemy (like cartoons that run in *Charlie Hebdo*) but not for speech that incites violence toward individuals (like provocative comments made by the comedian Dieudonné M'bala M'bala). This may appear to Americans as a distinction without a difference, but our distinctions are also confused, as is our way of talking about free speech as it overlaps with our politics.

The right wing in the United States is unusually strong compared with other industrialized democracies, and it has spent two generations turning *liberal* into a feared buzzword with radical connotations. This long propaganda campaign has implanted the misperception — not only among conservatives but even many liberals — that liberals and "the left" stand for the same things.

It is true that liberals and leftists both want to make society more economically and socially egalitarian. But liberals still hold to the classic Enlightenment political tradition that cherishes individuals rights, freedom of expression, and the protection of a kind of free political marketplace. (So, for that matter, do most conservatives.)

The Marxist left has always dismissed liberalism's commitment to protecting the rights of its political opponents — you know, the old line often misattributed to Voltaire, "I disapprove of what you have to say, but I'll defend to the death your right to say it" — as hopelessly naïve. If you maintain equal political rights for the oppressive capitalists and their proletarian victims, this will simply keep in place society's unequal power relations. Why respect the rights of the class whose power you're trying to smash? And so, according to Marxist thinking, your political rights depend entirely on what class you belong to.

The modern far left has borrowed the Marxist critique of liberalism and substituted race and gender identities for economic ones. "The liberal view," wrote MacKinnon 30 years ago, "is that abstract categories — like speech or equality — define systems. Every time you strengthen free speech in one place, you strengthen it everywhere. Strengthening the free speech of the Klan strengthens the free speech of Blacks." She deemed this nonsensical: "It equates substantive powerlessness with substantive power and calls treating these the same, 'equality.' "

Political correctness appeals to liberals because it claims to represent a more authentic and strident opposition to their shared enemy of race and gender bias. And of course liberals are correct not only to oppose racism and sexism but to grasp (in a way conservatives generally do not) that these biases cast a nefarious and continuing shadow over nearly every facet of American life. Since race and gender biases are embedded in our social and familial habits, our economic patterns, and even our subconscious minds, they need to be fought with some level of consciousness. The mere absence of overt discrimination will not do.

Liberals believe (or ought to believe) that social progress can continue while we maintain our traditional ideal of a free political marketplace where we can reason together as individuals. Political correctness challenges that bedrock liberal ideal. While *politically* less threatening than conservatism (the far right still commands far more power in American life), the p.c. left is actually more *philosophically* threatening. It is an undemocratic creed.

Bettina Aptheker, a professor of feminist studies at the University of California–Santa Cruz, recently wrote an essay commemorating the Berkeley Free Speech movement, in which she participated as a student in 1964. She now expressed a newfound skepticism in the merits of free speech. "Freedom of speech is a constitutional guarantee, but who gets to exercise it without the chilling restraints of censure depends very much on one's location in the political and social cartography," she wrote. "We [Free Speech movement] veterans … were too young and inexperienced in 1964 to know this, but we do now, and we speak with a new awareness, a new consciousness, and a new urgency that the wisdom of a true freedom is inexorably tied to who exercises power and for what ends."

These ideas have more than theoretical power. Last March at University of California–Santa Barbara, in, ironically, a "free-speech zone," a 16-year-old anti-abortion protester named Thrin

Short and her 21-year-old sister Joan displayed a sign arrayed with graphic images of aborted fetuses. They caught the attention of Mireille Miller-Young, a professor of feminist studies. Miller-Young, angered by the sign, demanded that they take it down. When they refused, Miller-Young snatched the sign, took it back to her office to destroy it, and shoved one of the Short sisters on the way.

Speaking to police after the altercation, Miller-Young told them that the images of the fetuses had "triggered" her and violated her "personal right to go to work and not be in harm." A Facebook group called "UCSB Microaggressions" declared themselves "in solidarity" with Miller-Young and urged the campus "to provide as much support as possible."

By the prevailing standards of the American criminal-justice system, Miller-Young had engaged in vandalism, battery, and robbery. By the logic of the p.c. movement, she was the victim of a trigger and had acted in the righteous cause of social justice. Her colleagues across the country wrote letters to the sentencing judge pleading for leniency. Jennifer Morgan, an NYU professor, blamed the anti-abortion protesters for instigating the confrontation through their exercise of free speech. "Miller-Young's actions should be mitigated both by her history as an educator as well as by her conviction that the [anti-abortion] images were an assault on her students," Morgan wrote. Again, the mere expression of opposing ideas, in the form of a poster, is presented as a threatening act.

The website The Feminist Wire mounted an even more rousing defense of Miller-Young's behavior. The whole idea that the professor committed a crime by stealing a sign and shoving away its owner turns out to be an ideological construct. "The ease with which privileged white, and particularly young white gender and sexually normative appearing women, make claims to 'victimhood' and 'violation of property,' is not a neutral move," its authors argued. It concluded, "We issue a radical call for accountability to questions of history, representation, and the racialized gendering of tropes of 'culpability' and 'innocence' when considering Dr. Miller-Young's case."

These are extreme ideas, but they are neither isolated nor marginal. A widely cited column by a *Harvard Crimson* editorial writer last year demanded an end to academic freedom if freedom extended to objectionable ideas. "If our university community opposes racism, sexism, and heterosexism," asked the author, "why should we put up with research that counters our goals simply in the name of 'academic freedom'?" After the *Nation*'s Michelle Goldberg denounced a "growing left-wing tendency toward censoriousness and hair-trigger offense," Rutgers professor Brittney Cooper replied in Salon: "The demand to be reasonable is a disingenuous demand. Black folks have been reasoning with white people forever. Racism is unreasonable, and that means reason has limited currency in the fight against it."

The most probable cause of death of the first political-correctness movement was the 1992 presidential election. That event mobilized left-of-center politics around national issues like health care and the economy, and away from the introspective suppression of dissent within the academy. Bill Clinton's campaign frontally attacked left-wing racial politics, famously using inflammatory comments by Sister Souljah to distance him from Jesse Jackson. Barbara Jordan, the first black woman from a southern state elected to the House of Representatives, attacked

political correctness in her keynote speech. ("We honor cultural identity. We always have; we always will. But separatism is not allowed. Separatism is not the American way. We must not allow ideas like political correctness to divide us and cause us to reverse hard-won achievements in human rights and civil rights.")

Yet it is possible to imagine that, as the next Clinton presidential campaign gets under way, p.c. culture may not dissolve so easily. The internet has shrunk the distance between p.c. culture and mainstream liberal politics, and the two are now hopelessly entangled. During the 2008 primary contest between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, the modern politics of grievance had already begun to play out, as each side's supporters patrolled the other for any comment that might indicate gender or racial bias. It dissipated in the general election, but that was partly because Obama's supporters worried about whether America really was ready to accept its first president who was not a white male. Clinton enters the 2016 race in a much stronger position than any other candidate, and her supporters may find it irresistible to amplify p.c. culture's habit of interrogating the hidden gender biases in every word and gesture against their side.

Or maybe not. The p.c. style of politics has one serious, possibly fatal drawback: It is exhausting. Claims of victimhood that are useful within the left-wing subculture may alienate much of America. The movement's dour puritanism can move people to outrage, but it may prove ill suited to the hopeful mood required of mass politics. Nor does it bode well for the movement's longevity that many of its allies are worn out. "It seems to me now that the public face of social liberalism has ceased to seem positive, joyful, human, and freeing," confessed the progressive writer Freddie deBoer. "There are so many ways to step on a land mine now, so many terms that have become forbidden, so many attitudes that will get you cast out if you even *appear* to hold them. I'm far from alone in feeling that it's typically not worth it to engage, given the risks." Goldberg wrote recently about people "who feel emotionally savaged by their involvement in [online feminism] — not because of sexist trolls, but because of the slashing righteousness of other feminists." Former Feministing editor Samhita Mukhopadhyay told her, "Everyone is so scared to speak right now."

That the new political correctness has bludgeoned even many of its own supporters into despondent silence is a triumph, but one of limited use. Politics in a democracy is still based on getting people to agree with you, not making them afraid to disagree. The historical record of political movements that sought to expand freedom for the oppressed by eliminating it for their enemies is dismal. The historical record of American liberalism, which has extended social freedoms to blacks, Jews, gays, and women, is glorious. And that glory rests in its confidence in the ultimate power of reason, not coercion, to triumph.

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