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The new liberal orthodoxy

On the rise of "liberal fascism."

For more than a year now, ever since the Mapplethorpe and Serrano affairs plunged the National Endowment for the Arts into the swamp of controversy from which it still shows no signs of retrieving itself, a great many liberal voices have been busily decrying an alleged threat to freedom of creative expression in this country. If we were to take literally what is being said by these liberal voices in the arts, in the media, and in various branches of public life—not to mention the professional arts-lobbying organizations that make a specialty of fear-mongering as a basic fundraising technique—we would have to believe that something approximating a reign of terror was now imminent—if not already underway—in American cultural life. Yet the odd thing about this alleged reign of terror is that the voices so loudly announcing it encounter absolutely no obstacles to their vociferous and protracted propaganda campaign. On the contrary, they quite dominate all discussion of this issue in the media and in public forums the country over—a curious way indeed for a threat to freedom of expression to manifest itself.

The truth is, of course, that the liberals and radicals who are in the vanguard of this campaign know very well that artists and writers in the United States who nowadays wish to speak out on so-called “cutting-edge” issues—which means, for the most part, writers and artists who conform to the current radical agenda on gender, lifestyle, and race—enjoy a greater degree of freedom of expression than ever before in our (or anyone else’s) history. They also enjoy far more power in shaping the cultural and intellectual life of our society than ever

before. What these liberal voices are talking about is something else—the right to control tax dollars for the purpose of supporting and expanding the legitimacy of their radical agenda.

Meanwhile, there is a very real threat to freedom of expression in cultural life today, a threat unmentioned by these liberal voices. And it goes unmentioned for the very good reason

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that these liberals are themselves the agents of coercion striving to deny us the right to oppose or even to characterize or question the new liberal orthodoxy that has come to govern all matters having to do with gender, race, ethnicity, sexual behavior, and moral values. What began as a program of affirmative action designed to win for “minorities” of various kinds access to employment and other opportunities traditionally denied them has now degenerated, as many predicted it would, into a campaign of censure and censorship that attempts to prohibit serious criticism of anything produced by a member of a requisite “minority” group in the name of art or culture. here is now only one group in American society that liberal opinion has given us dispensation to attack freely, only one group that it is O.K. to stigmatize for the villainous, “hegemonic” role it has played in the social, sexual, cultural, and political life of our civilization—and that group, it almost goes without saying, consists of white male heterosexuals. It’s also become O.K. in some liberal circles to attribute a kind of malevolent racial prejudice to a subdivision of this group—namely, white male heterosexuals who are Jews—so long as those making such charges belong to a “minority” that has been granted a special dispensation by liberal opinion to hurl outrageous and unfounded accusations as a “minority” right.

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That this coercive and malignant attempt to silence criticism in the name of racial, sexual, and ethnic equality should have become a major component of the liberal agenda for the 1990s is an historic tragedy for American society, and it is already turning large areas of American culture and American education

into a wasteland of ghastly pieties and even ghastlier opportunisms. The English writer Paul Johnson sounded a little extreme when he characterized this development only a few months ago as “the rise of liberal fascism.” But from the way this movement has lately accelerated, becoming bolder in its claims and staking out greater and greater spheres of influence, we can no longer be sure that Mr. Johnson was exaggerating. What we can now be certain of, in any case, is that the real threat to freedom of expression now looming in American cultural life is this liberal threat: It has already derailed the debate over the National Endowment for the Arts and is making ever more extraordinary inroads into the governance of our mainstream institutions.

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