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Sexual politics at MIT

It is no secret that the demand for political correctness has more than a whiff of the totalitarian about it. There is, first of all, a blatant disregard for what is contemptuously described as “empirical reality” in the name of slogan-like “ideals” (“diversity” “sensitivity” “ethnic pride” etc.). Then there is the tendency to transform every contested matter of fact into a question of personal motivation and character: if you disagree with me you are a traitor to the cause. There is also a deliberate vagueness about aims and goals that allows one to contradict oneself with impunity while constantly raising the ante on one’s demands. And, finally, there is a generalized cynicism, at least among leaders, that encourages one to regard every matter of principle as a power struggle. The movement for political correctness has not—not yet—turned murderous, but such telltale markers characterize it as surely as they characterized the totalitarian movements of the twentieth century.

Even as we write, a splendid illustration of political correctness at work is unfolding at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology—not, thank goodness, among the scientists or engineers, but, as usual, among the “humanists” the professors of literature. Cynthia Griffin Wolff, a noted scholar of American literature and a tenured professor at mit’s School of Humanities, has filed suit against her employer for breach of contract. According to a complaint dated April 7, 1992, Professor Wolff is seeking damages for mit’s “acquiescence in and perpetuation of a persistent and continuing pattern of professional, political and sexual harassment.” The complaint proceeds to detail both the obloquy and ostracism that Professor Wolff has allegedly suffered at the hands of her politically correct colleagues as well as mit’s consistent refusal to intervene effectively on her behalf.

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What makes this case more than business as usual in the pc-haven of the academy is Professor Wolff’s own impeccable credentials as a feminist scholar. A specialist in the works of Emily Dickinson and Edith Wharton, she has long been an advocate of Women’s Studies, Cultural Studies, and other up-to-date items on the academic multicultural menu. *The New York*

Times noted in its recent report on the case that Professor Wolff considers herself a “progressive feminist.” “Progressive” perhaps, but obviously not progressive enough. As the *Times* conceded, Professor Wolff “still believed in applying traditional scholarly standards in her academic work.” And this retrograde belief, at least for some of her colleagues at MIT, was enough to brand her as that unspeakable thing, a “neo-conservative.”

Professor Wolff’s commitment to traditional scholarly standards has shown itself not only in her scholarly work but also in her behavior regarding promotion and tenure. Although she is apparently a firm believer in affirmative action, Professor Wolff has nonetheless based her judgment of candidates for appointment or promotion on their scholarly credentials, not their politics. According to the complaint, her votes against granting tenure to various politically correct candidates have won her the lasting enmity of certain powerful colleagues who have embarked upon, as the complaint charges, “an unrelenting campaign of verbal abuse and isolation” refusing to allow Professor Wolff to teach in the Women Studies Program, denying her release time, spreading groundless rumors to impugn her integrity, and bad-mouthing her to junior colleagues as “poison.”

Professor Wolff, along with Irene Tayler, a colleague in the Literature Section, has also had the temerity to object to allowing hiring decisions to degenerate into a kind of pimping service for the faculty. As her complaint reports, “twice, in two different years, Professor David Halperin, an outspoken advocate of gay and lesbian views, demanded that the [Literature] Section interview a specific candidate because he said he was ‘in love’ with the candidate. When Professors Wolff and Tayler expressed opposition to this rationale for hiring, Professor Halperin verbally attacked them for expressing ‘homophobic’ attitudes.” According to *The New York Times*, Professor Halperin admitted making this comment but insisted that he did so “in the interest of full disclosure” and did not mean that mit “should hire [the candidate] because I was in love with him.” Be that as it may, it is worth noting that at least one assistant professor—a male—has repeatedly complained of being sexually harassed by Professor Halperin, and has confided to Professor Wolff that he was worried his complaints might compromise his opportunities for advancement. Professor Halperin has denied any wrongdoing. But when an independent committee was set up to investigate the case, it found that the tenure decision of the person in question had unfolded in a ‘context of malice and destructive behavior.’”

In short, mit has provided the public with a new and unusually grisly chapter in the continuing saga of sexual intimidation and political correctness on campus. It is a story in which cultural politics and sexual preference have insinuated themselves into the center of decisions that by rights should be based on an examination of scholarly qualifications. As her complaint states, Professor Wolff found herself in a situation in which “all aspects of the personnel process—hiring, reappointment, and tenure decisions—had become so egregious and vicious that responsible professional behavior had become impossible”, a situation in which the faculty had fallen “into a chaotic state in which the sheer exercise of power governed the behavior of many of its members, and all forms of process and procedure had been abandoned.” It would be nice if we could believe

that this latest episode of the academic PC-follies at MIT were unique or even rare. Unfortunately, all indications are that this sordid display is merely a glimpse of things to come.

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