

The New Criterion

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Peter Brooks's complaint

In the thirteen years that *The New Criterion* has been in existence, we have often had occasion to criticize the depredations of multiculturalism and political correctness. Indeed, even before the terms “multiculturalism” and “political correctness” gained currency, in the mid- to late-1980s, we frequently inveighed against efforts to enlist the arts and humanities in the subversive political campaigns of the cultural left. That those efforts have been largely successful—that they have managed to transform the art world and large precincts of the American university into hotbeds of ideological activism—is now a fundamental datum of our cultural life.

We appreciate that “hotbeds of ideological activism” is a contentious way of putting the matter. But our experience convinces us that it is accurate. Moreover, we have discovered that a more delicate phraseology is not so much conciliatory as feckless: an invitation to

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discount the seriousness of the issue. The dictum that “everything is political”; the assumption that the real albeit often unacknowledged goal of intellectual activity is the acquisition or consolidation of power, not knowledge; the acceptance of the most degraded products of popular culture as suitable objects of academic scrutiny; the insistence that issues such as race and sexuality be regarded primarily as ideological litmus tests—these are among the cherished dogmas that fuel multiculturalism and political correctness. The effect of such dogmas has been ruinous. Their gradual institutionalization—in the academy, in the museums, in the media, and elsewhere—has done much to distort and coarsen cultural life, reducing it to a coefficient of one or another ideological cause. Only now is the full extent of the intellectual and spiritual wreckage becoming evident.

Over the years, we have done our best to provide readers with a series of damage reports, anatomizing some of the more glaring casualties in what have come to be called the culture wars. We have not been alone in this effort. While the official custodians of culture and academic life have continued to capitulate to the multicultural onslaught, numerous critics have emerged to

challenge the new orthodoxies. It is hardly surprising, we suppose, that partisans of the multicultural imperative have regarded such critics as interlopers, and have accordingly treated them with varying degrees of disdain and rancor. Nevertheless, the concentrated fury of the response has been noteworthy.

A case in point was afforded by *The Times Literary Supplement* in the special issue it published at the end of May on "Cultural Studies." For many of us, the fact that so venerable a literary organ as the *TLS* should have devoted respectful attention to this Marxist-inspired celebration of popular culture is itself a melancholy sign of the triumph of multiculturalism. What, after all, does it mean that the *TLS*, once one of the most serious literary reviews in English, should emblazon its cover with a large orange muppet? What does it mean that its featured article should be "The Zipper Unzipped," a long, flattering piece about the cultural history of the zipper? That among its main articles should be a favorable notice of *Barbie's Queer Accessories*, a book about Barbie dolls by an "art historian and lesbian activist" named Erica Rand? (If you have ever wanted to ponder children's toys "in the light of Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony," here is your chance.) None of this is good news.

But the piece that most captured our attention was "Frightened with False Fire: Misunderstandings of the Culture Wars," by the Yale professor Peter Brooks. Readers of *The New Criterion* will perhaps remember Mr. Brooks, for we have had occasion to criticize him more than once. A professor of French and sometime director of the Whitney Humanities Center at Yale, Mr. Brooks is a walking epitome of the new academic orthodoxy in its mandarin, full-professor variety. And although he has receded somewhat from the scene lately, Mr. Brooks still crops up from time to time to castigate critics of multiculturalism and political correctness as know-nothing right-wingers who have no business venting their opinions in public.

The latest spur to Mr. Brooks's ire was *Our Country, Our Culture: The Politics of Political Correctness*, a collection of some two dozen brief essays on political correctness reprinted from a special issue of *Partisan Review*. Since the editors of *The New Criterion* and several contributors to its pages are represented in this volume, we turned to Mr. Brooks's animadversions with considerable interest. He did not disappoint. With Pavlovian predictability, he complained that the book is "essentially repetitious mouthings of conservative indictments of the culture of the universities." Under the editorship of William Phillips, he said, *Partisan Review*, though once a "fiercely independent" organ of the left, had lamentably drifted "rightwards" and was now, sad to say, "most comfortable in the company of *The New Criterion* and *Commentary*."

Mr. Brooks indulges in a bit more throat-clearing, criticizing Mr. Phillips for resorting "to the language of patriotism" — behavior that he regards as "a sad measure of *Partisan Review*'s current stand." (Mr. Phillips had written that the academic left, although not exactly Marxist, was "to a large extent anti-American, in some quarters anti-capitalist, pro-third world, pro-minority, and anti-Western [in its] cultural and political interests" — can Mr. Brooks seriously dispute this?) When he finally gets around to the subject of political correctness, Mr. Brooks favors us with a little

dance. He himself is not an advocate of p.c. Indeed, he regards the politically correct effort to legislate virtue as “clearly misguided and pernicious, however well intentioned the motives.” About affirmative action, he even says that “any concept of preferment on bases other than intellectual merit appears hostile to the very definition of the university.” We would agree.

But then Mr. Brooks takes it all back. Really, he says, the threat of political correctness is a chimera invented by the right. Never mind that scores of books and articles have provided a vast inventory of P.C. horror stories: Mr. Brooks assures readers of the *tls* that “the same few examples are constantly recycled . . . because there aren’t all that many to choose from.” Moreover, he says, “the p.c. phenomenon” was “always exaggerated” by the cultural right and then “given a spin by such as the newsweeklies, which are increasingly hostile to the culture of the universities as a whole.”

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“*Such as the newsweeklies . . .*” This is one of Mr. Brooks’s favorite gestures of dismissal. Earlier, he had referred to “particularly savage” pieces in *Our Country, Our Culture* by “such as Heather Mac Donald, Ronald Radosh, Alan Wolfe” — as if these

distinguished writers were something the cat brought in. Such arrogance has long been a staple of Mr. Brooks’s criticism. In *Speaking for the Humanities*, a notorious pamphlet he co-authored for the American Council of Learned Societies in 1989, he contemptuously referred to non-academic critics as “amateurs—belle lettrists who unselfconsciously sustain traditional hierarchies, traditional social and cultural exclusions.” As the English critic John Gross noted apropos this passage, what Mr. Brooks and his co-authors reject is the very “possibility of a serious critic operating outside the academic fold.”

Mr. Brooks’s smug attitude toward critics without guild certification betokens a distasteful snobbishness. It is, however, a corollary of his evident—and eminently politically correct—assumption that the university is simply more progressive, more virtuous, than the rest of society: American universities, he says, “have tried to address issues of racial tension, gender inequality and sexual orientations once defined as ‘deviant,’ in a way that society as a whole is not yet willing to take on.” Not yet. But someday “society as a whole” will perhaps be enlightened by—may we say it?—such as Mr. Brooks.

Yet more troubling than Mr. Brooks’s arrogance is the vision of the humanities that informs it. He explains that after World War II, the American university expanded rapidly and became “more serious, and inevitably more specialized.” American society, he says, was “willing to allow hard scientists to pursue their research wherever it might take them.” It even gave social scientists a large dispensation. But somehow, Mr. Brooks complains, society expected the humanities “to remain the place of the good and the true, a kind of timeless contemplation of the best that has

been thought and said (the cultural right is fond of citing Matthew Arnold)."

Of course, Mr. Brooks's description is meant to be a caricature, as if "the good and the true" and "the best that has been thought and said" were just too impossibly twee to be taken seriously by any academic worth his salt. But think about it. Why do we value the humanities? By bringing science into the equation, Mr. Brooks implies that the knowledge humanists purvey is analogous to that provided by science. Is it? Certainly, there are facts to be ascertained in the humanities: for example, who wrote what when and where. But at its core the humanities are not akin to science. They do not progress. They provide us with no predictive power. The knowledge they give us is not first of all factual or instrumental knowledge but knowledge of the human heart. The humanities are important because, as Aristotle put it, they teach us appropriate "habits," appropriate modes of feeling. That is to say, the humanities are part of what used to be called, without apology, moral education. This is something that Mr. Brooks and other advocates of the multicultural university have entirely lost sight of—something, indeed, that they would actively disparage. Mr. Brooks worries that the "compact between American society and its universities" has been breached by the culture wars. He is right. But that is largely because most people outside the academy do not believe that books like *Barbie's Queer Accessories* or the inanities of deconstruction and post-structuralism are worthy examples of the humanistic enterprise.

Mr. Brooks concludes bitterly with the hope that "now that a noisy and rambunctious right has taken over the legislature, its cultural pundits will feel reassured, turn to their regressive social programme, and leave the universities alone." Alas, it is not the "cultural pundits" who are to blame for the devastation of the American university, but the politically correct advocates of multi-culturalism and other politicized fads—such as Mr. Brooks—who have betrayed the humanities.

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