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Political Pedagogy and Democratic Discourse

Bringing War and Peace into the Classroom[1]

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Newsweek's Christmas cover was ominously Orwellian: "THOUGHT POLICE." Beneath this headline readers were warned, "Watch what you say, there's a 'politically correct' way to talk about race, sex and ideas. Is this the New Enlightenment—or the New McCarthyism?"[2] *Newsweek* has not, however, found it necessary to worry in print about the pervasive "political correctness" of conservative traditions long taken for granted in academia, or about all the "militarily correct" coverage of the war against Iraq.

This strangely one-sided fear surfaced a few years ago when a little-known classics professor named Allan Bloom fired a shot heard round the academic world. He attacked what he saw as a creeping democratization of college curricula. His book (1987) was a polemic against all who questioned the "classical" canon in the humanities. Bloom seems to believe that anyone who asks, for example, why there aren't more women or non-European writers in this canon is eroding "excellence" and watering down our cultural heritage.

Apparently, such curious claims resonated among the Reaganist Right, for Bloom grew rich on royalties and emboldened *National Review* types everywhere to new heights of liberal bashing. At Dartmouth, for example, arch-conservative students ridiculed as "oppression studies" all courses that deal with the social construction of class, racial, and gender inequalities. Shortly thereafter, related debates about the politics of "Western Civ" requirements and about what constitutes "cultural literacy" littered the pages of *The Nation*, the *New York Review of Books*, and *The New Republic*.

This essay will suggest that despite all the recent rantings about liberal or left-wing "political correctness," even the professors who constitute the targets of such attacks—those assorted "progressives" reputed to be "PC"—are in fact interested in developing critical thinking and democratic discourse rather than imposing ideological orthodoxy.

Against War, For Education

A week after the Gulf War began, a loosely-knit group of faculty at the University of California, Santa Cruz, had a discussion on "how one brings the issues of war into the classroom." All of us were, one way or another, opposed to the war. The campus has a reputation—caricatured but not utterly undeserved—as a center of liberal-left students and faculty. To conservatives, UCSC is a veritable bastion of feminist, neo-Marxist, multiculturalist, postmodernist, and other subversive thought. It was the first major campus in the nation to have an anti-war "shut down," which was supported by a majority of the students and at least a large minority of the faculty.

If ever there were a place where "political correctness" was more than a figment of the Right's paranoid imagination, Santa Cruz was it. If ever there were a time at Santa Cruz when the alleged agenda of the academic Left would infiltrate classrooms, the Gulf War was it.

Imagine my surprise, then, when some sixty members of the hastily formed "Faculty Against the War" spent most of the evening talking about how to *avoid* being "politically correct." The topic was how to bring the war into the classroom, but despite their own views their comments centered on how not to trample on the beliefs of those who were ambivalent about or in favor of the war. The theme throughout was simply the importance of making higher education speak to world events and vice versa.

Perhaps it was the discomforting memories of long, contentious evenings of their youth spent hammering out a "line" or "position" to which all "true" radicals should stick. Perhaps it was their desire to sidestep the sectarian squabbles that punctuate the history of the American Left.[3] Or perhaps it was their sense that 1960s phrases like "raising the consciousness of the masses" sounded silly and elitist in historical hindsight.

Whatever the reasons, no member of Faculty Against the War even suggested that the classroom should be a setting for anything but the sort of critical thinking that Socrates encouraged in Plato and his other students. In a room riddled with Marxists of varying "neo" and "post" hues, the discourse had a strikingly Jeffersonian cast. Indeed, at least for this collection of anti-war types, the very term "politically correct" had always been used as a form of humorous ridicule, the butt of which was the occasional true-believing hard-liner who annoyed all by actually acting as if there were such a thing as "politically correct."

Make no mistake, all members of Faculty Against the War were sympathetic to the students who had begun to protest; all supported some kind of student mobilization. Yet, when one member shyly suggested that even in this moment of crisis we might not want to abandon our traditional subject matters in favor of a movement-oriented or war-related curriculum, everyone instantly agreed.

Thus, one pedagogical principle agreed upon right away was to allow the war to bring the subject matter alive and allow the subject matter to bring the war alive, rather than abandon traditional curricular concerns. The goal seemed to be to give students a more complex understanding of the war than what was appearing on television

screens and front pages. The point was to situate the Gulf War in historical and cultural context, such situating being central to our pedagogical mission anyway.

A second pedagogical principle agreed upon immediately was the need to organize discussions so that all students, regardless of their views on the war, felt safe about articulating their views, hopes, and fears. We decided that the best strategy for doing this was to encourage students to speak about war issues *before* we did, and to take pains to explain *how* we reached our own personal conclusions about the war, not just *what* these conclusions were. Thus, while no one thought it wise or even possible to conceal our own beliefs, we did agree that teaching students how to think critically about the world we face was the important thing, whether or not they ever ended up agreeing with us.

As the discussion proceeded, I could not avoid wondering, "What if a *Newsweek* reporter were here, or a *60 Minutes* camera crew, recording it all?" Perhaps, as so often happens, the story line would be set before the story was garnered, and the lead would read *"Pinko Prof's 'PC' on Persian Gulf."* But I still felt that even Republican parents would not have worried about their children's minds being poisoned if they could have heard this discussion.

I said just this to the assembled members of Faculty Against the War. I proposed that we survey all present about how they proposed to introduce war-related issues into their courses and then compile the responses in a form that might be a resource for us and for all kinds of other teachers. Most seemed to think this was a useful project, and so I proceeded.

What follows are selected responses from this survey, drawn from faculty in different disciplines. They were chosen to illustrate the *variety* of ways one faculty group developed to teach about war and peace. The theme in all the responses was anti-"PC": how to bring the Gulf crisis into the curriculum *democratically*, not as an attempt to mobilize movements against the war, but rather as an exercise in the sort of critical thinking that has been the American vision of higher education since Jefferson.

■ *Greek Literature*

Students read Sophocles' *Women in Trachis* in ancient Greek and were asked for their ideas on "how we might use class time most profitably and give attention to the current crisis." The class decided to discuss "the masculinist and militarist ideologies in the play" and to have the professor compile "an additional reader made up of ancient texts which specifically treat war." She chose texts which illustrated "the rhetoric of war, for example, the speeches of Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, in which arguments are put forth in support of or against certain military options."

Reading and discussing such works, she felt, would expose the students to general arguments about "rational" reasons for war, like those our leaders offer, and about "cultural differences, strategic goals, moral and ethical beliefs." Seeing such arguments in ancient texts would, she hoped, "provide a distance which fosters awareness of prejudices and preconceptions." The professor's stated purpose was "to locate, identify, and problematize rhetorical power as a part of Greek civic/political ideology," and,

more specifically, to understand critically how such power historically has played a part in military action for good or ill.

■ *Practical Literary Criticism*

Before the outbreak of the War, the professor in this course stressed that "One function of the university is to enable us to have larger and larger conversations, increasingly informed, complex, and at once focused and flexible." He then modified the course so that part of each class was devoted to having such conversations about the war. Specifically, he urged students "to use relevant situations in applying literary theory," and for many "the most relevant, overweening situation is our nation at war."

This professor traditionally covered Kenneth Burke's literary theory of semantic and poetic meaning, which this quarter was "made concrete by examples from current Pentagon and media terminology." The class discussed "the elimination of attitude" in language, which attempts, as Burke put it, "to obtain a full moral act by attaining a perspective atop all the conflicts of attitude" (for example, using sanitized terms such as "collateral damage" that camouflaged "civilian deaths," or using "weapons delivery" for "bombing"). This professor held that "all literary theory, from Plato to Derrida, is immensely important, once we aim it towards the discourse/texts of war." While he did not formally change the curriculum, he did redirect it toward current events.

■ *State and Ritual in the 19th and 20th Centuries*

This history course centers on the politics of ritual, symbolism, imagery, and the media. The professor reported that he tried to be "sensitive to the issue of coercing 'political correctness'." He made his own opposition to the war clear, "while at the same time inviting differing opinions." He participated in the 2-day shut-down so as "to allow students to get informed about the present crisis," but he added a make-up class so that those not participating in the shut-down, as well as those who did, would get the whole course. "[As] a general principle I believe that it is imperative that we do not abandon the original purposes of our courses." Even if he had been teaching a less germane course, he wrote, he "would have insisted upon continuing on schedule, even while encouraging students to become educated outside of class":

> *I would have mentioned relevant issues whenever possible, perhaps employing a comparative approach to highlight general issues about power, or the cult of the political leader, or about the dangers of simplifying non-Western cultures. I don't feel that anything is to be gained by transforming every class on campus into the same class on the war, or by making every class relevant in an overly simplistic way. Such moves, I think, would only serve to trivialize the crisis at hand."*

To make the course more relevant, he "changed a few readings" and "added assignments on demonstrations and the media, the symbolic power of the presidency, the use of metaphors in this war situation, and television's coverage of mass demonstrations" such as Tiananmen. He also "encouraged students to share war news, particu-

larly as it related to the course, and to bring in any written or videotaped materials that might be interesting to all."

This professor presented such changes as a proposal to the class and asked for their opinions. All agreed and "seemed genuinely enthusiastic about continuing with the original plans of the course, along with the changes." He "encouraged students not to feel obligated to take up such [war-related] topics" because he felt "strongly that students should be given a great deal of latitude in how they will think through the war." Several students did research projects on war topics, many did not.

■ *Composition and Rhetoric*

The professor teaching this writing course decided *against* changing her syllabus to incorporate war-relevant materials. Her theme had always been "ways of knowing," which is not explicitly related. However, she wrote that

> *many of the readings are directly relevant, and the entire process of teaching students to read/think/write critically and creatively, drawing on all their human skills and potentials (intellect, emotion, bodily feelings, memory, imagination, etc.) constitutes, I believe, the kind of empowerment and sophistication that enables [them] to deal more effectively with the array of factors that promote and/or condone war.*

She made "room for open discussions of the war" during the first week, but phased these out "in order to stay with the course syllabus." She did, however, encourage students to "write on war-related issues in both their journals and their papers," and she frequently made connections in lecture between the readings and current events. For instance, she drew on Susan Griffin's essay, "Ideologies of Madness," on the "schizophrenic root assumptions that encourage projections of our own devalued personal characteristics onto others, enabling us to 'other' them." Her examination of such projections showed how they have been used to "fuel and justify racist acts, nuclear build-up, war and genocide." The professor then urged students to chronicle their own emotional responses to the war so as to watch for such projections. Thus, while she did not remake her course to fit the war situation, she did link her traditional curriculum to it. The result was that "no class has gone by since the war started without some discussion of it and connection to the regularly assigned readings."

■ *History of Archeology*

This course features "the social and political contexts in which ideas of the past, of 'primitives,' and of other cultures developed." Within this course the professor regularly touched on "our present US dilemmas in dealing with Arabs and their history." She did not, however, "revamp" her course at all, "but simply weaved the presently pressing issues into it as appropriate."

One mechanism she found helpful in doing this was to "spend about five or ten minutes at the beginning of each class in discussion of whatever is preoccupying peo-

ple, in order to 'get there,' to concentrate on the class." Her students ranged widely in age (from 20 to 60) and thus in outlook, so the rich interchange that ensued broadened the historical horizons of all present—about the Persian Gulf War and about many other things.

■ *Empirical Analysis*

In this graduate seminar in Sociology, the professor covers a wide array of methodological approaches to social science research. He normally covers war-related topics in another course called Violence, War, and Peace. But when the war broke out, he was immersed in a methods course and was discussing survey research. He wrote that "the students chose to orient their own survey around Gulf War issues, and our class discussion examined closely the relevant methodological issues." For example,

> *we addressed how question wording could affect responses in national survey research related to the war. Asking respondents whether they supported the war in general produces very different answers than if they are asked if they support the war "even if 10,000 American soldiers are killed."*

Given the students' preoccupation with the War, "it was easy to build a bridge between the usual subject matter of the course and the emerging national focus on the War, support for the War, and related subjects." Thus, without redirecting his traditional subject matter or skipping any aspects of social science methods, this professor provided students with technical skills useful for understanding war-related issues such as the mobilization (and the fragile, socially-constructed character) of public opinion.

■ *Italian Renaissance History*

The professor teaching this course wrote that she, too, preferred to keep her classroom focus on her traditional subject matter. She added, however, that "It is fairly easy to make modern comparisons" with the Renaissance. For example, she always covers the destruction of cultural artifacts in Europe during wrenching events like World War II, so she found it useful to point out "what is at stake in the Middle East, besides the obvious loss of lives and money."

Near the end of the course, she has her students read Machiavelli's works on political theory, which she expected would invite many other modern comparisons. She did not plan to move beyond such organic links between her traditional subject matter and the current crisis. In her view, "Students feel disoriented enough as it is without having constant comparisons in a course on Renaissance history and art, so I try not to bombard them."

■ *Self and Society*

This is a "Core" course for first-year students in which they read a book a week by authors ranging from Martin Luther to Black Elk, and write extensively. At the out-

break of the War, the professor, whose son was in the Army in Saudi Arabia, proposed to students the following:

> *The outbreak of war in the Persian Gulf has prompted all of us to ask disturbing questions about ourselves and our societies. Many of us feel in a state of turmoil, doubt, anger, anxiety, and fear. None of us can say what effect world events will have on us or how they will affect our discussions in Core. Personally, I think it would be crazy to try to act as if nothing has changed. Yet I also believe that the thoughtful and critical consideration of the Core course texts can be conducive to developing those attitudes, skills, and commitments that will someday lead to a world where physical violence is not an appropriate or necessary activity. Violence signals the end of education, or, at least, the unwillingness to engage in the dialogue and learning that is an alternative to war. Whatever any of us feels about the violence that is now occurring in the Middle East and has been occurring all over the world for centuries, we need not stop our learning. In fact, the War could even be an impetus to learn more, to learn differently, to find and engage in learning that could lead to a more just world.*

This professor blocked out time for students to "check in," to share concerns, to make announcements. She then elicited their ideas on how they wanted to proceed with the course and asked them to pose questions to their texts such as, "How the war relates to your learning, what you want to learn, what you want to do, what questions about selves and societies have now become important to you." More specifically, she outlined a series of analytic questions on the general topic of conflict, which she suggested they pose to their traditional readings:

> *What causes conflict? How do people respond to conflict? How might people have responded differently? What would have had to happen for something different to happen? Can we live without conflict? How? Do we need to change selves? Societies? How is war valuable to selves and societies in these texts? Do we/you value war for the same reasons? What are the alternatives to war? Do these alternatives require you and others to give up their values, to change their values? What are the risks to selves and societies in imagining a world where we let our enemies live?*

Overall, faculty responses showed substantial variation. Some responded to the outbreak of war by merely noting in their lectures some of the incidental links between their traditional subject matters and the current crisis. Others found creative ways to make some room for war issues as part of an existing course or to add war-related topics to their syllabi. In some instances, anti-war faculty did not bring war-related issues into their classrooms at all (for example, a professor of computer engineering wrote that, although he would like to, he could find no way to integrate any discussion of war matters into a course on "digital synthesis techniques for musical sound").

All responses, however, shared one, overarching theme: The insistence that however much or little the Persian Gulf War had to do with the subject at hand, any attempt to integrate it into courses had to be done with utmost respect for differing beliefs. Although some might say that the members of Faculty Against the War are a decidedly "PC" lot, their pedagogical priorities and practices were not. Instead of a

left-collectivist conspiracy to impose ideology, we had *individuals* using a wide range of unique strategies for developing in students the basic capacities for critical thinking that would allow them to make up their own minds about how the world works.

This does not mean, of course, that students whose teachers teach them to ask tough questions of ancient literary texts or with modern research techniques will not be radicalized in some way. The sort of free thinking intellectual breadth that is the objective of truly democratic education always runs the risk of delegitimating dominant discourses. Perhaps it is my own ideological bias or romantic idealism, but I suspect that parents want more from their children's faculty than the standard media fare of uncritical cheerleading for "the troops." If so, they will be proud to have their daughters and sons exposed to the sort of pedagogy described above. For although we, as citizen-professors, may not believe in the War, we do believe in intellectual craft and the spirit of critical, democratic inquiry. ■

Notes

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2. *Thanks to Roz Spafford for calling this* Newsweek *article to my attention and for other stimulating ideas in her essay on "political correctness" (1991).*

3. *For a unique and important analysis of the strengths of the Left tradition, as well as the underlying sources of these squabbles within it, see Flacks (1988).*

References

Bloom, A.D. (1987). The closing of the American mind: How higher education has failed democracy and impoverished the souls of today's students. *New York: Simon & Schuster.*

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