



By Jonathan Eig

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Before we start this discussion of political correctness, readers should know that trees were destroyed to make the paper upon which these words are printed. The paper can be recycled, however, if the reader is so inclined.

Also keep in mind that the reader's interpretation of this article may be influenced by his or her race, class and sex.

Finally, the placement of this piece in the general vicinity of the *Doonesbury* cartoon is strictly coincidental and says nothing about the political intentions of this story.

With that out of the way, we can begin.

On college campuses around the country, liberal students are applying fierce pressure to enforce what some have called "politically correct" thought — or P.C. Complaining that Eurocentric white males have too long dominated academia, students are promoting a new curriculum and, most recently, new codes of speech and behavior.

But the term political correctness, by itself, is biased. Loaded with hints of McCarthyism, it suggests that there is a right way and a wrong way to think.

Jesse Jackson is good, Jesse Helms is bad. Brown bags are good, plastic is bad.

There are no in-betweens.

Some say that politically correct people — the P.C.P. — have become thought police, enforcing open-mindedness as a new brand of fundamentalism. But even as the criticism grows, the P.C. movement's influence is spreading far beyond the idealized world of the college campus.

It's now possible to own a P.C. stock portfolio with investments only in companies that do no harm to the environment. A P.C. grocery list contains only biodegradable products and goods not tested on animals. There are even P.C. movies, such as *Dances With Wolves*.

The trend reaches into the funny pages, too. Jeff Shesol, a student at Brown University, draws a biting cartoon in college newspapers about the exploits of *Politically Correct Person*. The caped superhero refers to 9-year-old girls as "pre-women" and agonizes over the fact that he's a straight

Please see P.C. on Page 8J.

# P.C. or not P.C., that is the question

Continued from Page 1J.  
white male.

There's even a whole new P.C. vocabulary: Indians are Native Americans, people with physical disabilities are "differently abled," and some women have shunned male bias by becoming "womyn."

But the heart of the issue remains in academia, and the central question is what should be studied and which authors should be read.

Multiculturalism is good. The Good Old Boys of Western culture — Locke, Hobbes and Jefferson, to name a few — are bad.

Should da Vinci, Freud and Aristotle lead today's college students toward enlightenment, as they have for centuries? Or would a curriculum of black, Hispanic and feminist authors make more sense in this age of growing racial and ethnic diversity?

That question alone would have been enough to keep controversy simmering on hundreds of college campuses for years. But the P.C. agenda has gone beyond curriculum. Some think it has become a way of life.

"It's like a religion," says Alan Gribben, a University of Texas at Austin professor who claims P.C. zealots have forced him to resign and seek work out of state. "Race, class and gender explain everything about the faults of our society," he said, summing up the P.C. philosophy. "They just live and breathe this. It's a form of fanaticism, I think."

The P.C.P. say they have only the best intentions: to change the political consciousness of an entire generation; to encourage progressive and compassionate policies on race, ecology, culture, feminism and foreign policy.

And, to be sure, change is occurring. Minority groups long ignored in academia have been recognized and even embraced. The chants of the 1960s — peace, love and understanding — now get official university support as former protesters build careers as teachers and administrators.

On today's college campuses, it's no longer enough to avoid racism, sexism or even "lookism" (the New Age sin of judging someone based on his or her attractiveness). According to the new enlightenment, rules should be devised to enforce proper behavior, and students should be required to study cultures that have been too long overlooked.

But there's an inherent hypocrisy in political correctness, according to its critics. Contrary to the principles upon which the university is founded, tolerance and free expression take a back seat to conformity.

The rain forest is good, Exxon is bad. Believe it or else.

Conservatives and an increasing number of liberals complain that some "incorrect" topics have effectively been removed from the public debate. To criticize the strategy of affirmative action, or even to criticize an individual member of a minority group, is to risk a career-threatening backlash.

Joking can be dangerous, too.

In October, a professor at the University of California at Santa Barbara pointed out during a lecture on ethics that some people now call pets "animal companions." Then he wondered aloud whether women posing for Penthouse are still called Pets, or if they're now Penthouse Animal Companions.

Several female students filed a sexual-harassment complaint against the professor.

Dr. Gribben, an English professor, says he's been ostracized by his colleagues, slandered by rumors and attacked in campuswide rallies as an "ultraright-winger."

He describes himself as a political moderate. But he drew the wrath of his campus for opposing what he calls the "standardization" of a required freshman composition course.

Under a proposed format change, students in English 306 would have written analyses of anti-discrimination court cases instead of writing about literary classics, as they had in the past.

After a stormy debate, the new course was canceled and the committee studying the change resigned. Nevertheless, Dr. Gribben quit after 17 years at UT.

"I didn't realize I'd gotten in the way of a steamroller, and my career has never been the same," he said.

He is not the only person to feel the effects of the new fundamentalism.

■ A professor at Western Ontario University now confines his lectures to videotape because he is afraid his controversial views on race and intelligence might incite violence.

■ The chairman of the English department at Duke University suggested that professors who support traditional values in the curriculum should be banned from serving on

important faculty committees.

■ At San Francisco State University, 30 students disrupted a course in black politics — not because of anything the professor had done, but because the course had been listed under political science rather than black studies.

Geoff Henley, a senior at UT, said liberal values have overrun the curriculum.

"I wanted to read *The Inferno*, Goethe's *Faust*," he said. "Instead, I got *The Woman Warrior*."

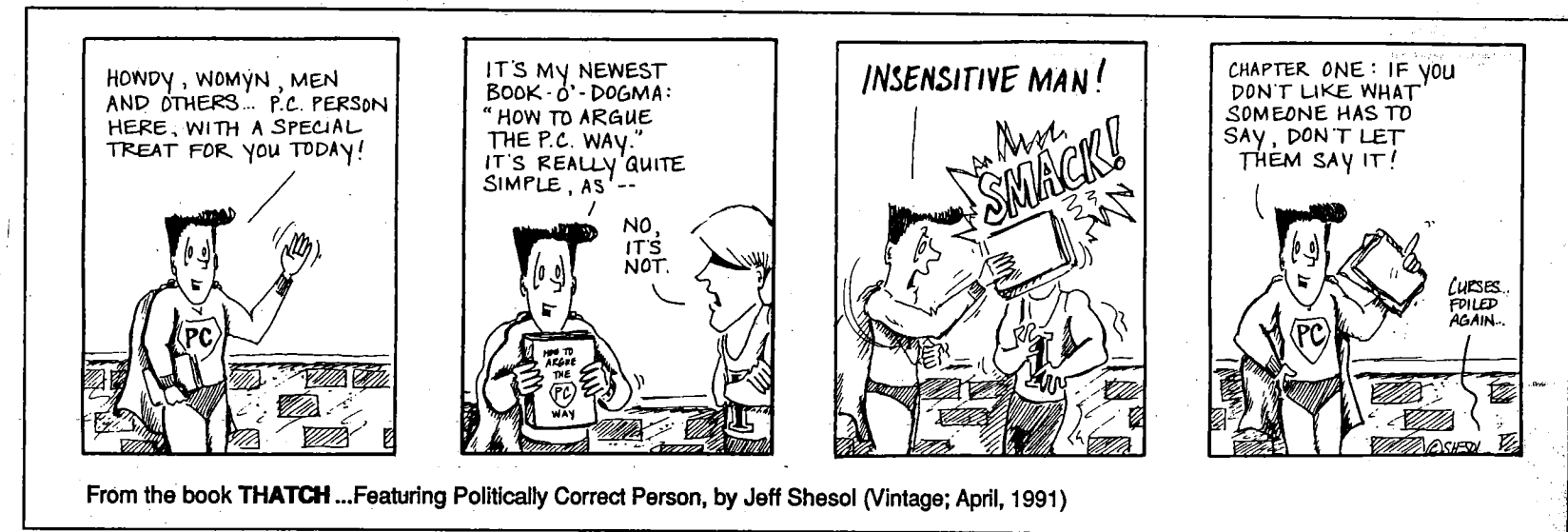
The argument goes like this: Twenty years ago, Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice* was considered a work of genius, and it filled the shelves of college bookstores. Today it's deemed little more than a footnote in African-American literature and history. Twenty years from now, Mr. Henley wonders, who will remember *The Woman Warrior*?

Mr. Henley said he has faced heavy criticism for questioning the tenets of P.C.

"I've been vilified for being ethnocentric, homophobic, racist, sexist, elitist — anything you can think of," he said.

Lately, though, supporters of multiculturalism have themselves come under heavy attack. Some factions of the media, seizing on the most extreme examples of P.C. run amok, have portrayed the reformers as loonies.

Sometimes it's too easy. Consider



From the book **THATCH** ...Featuring Politically Correct Person, by Jeff Shesol (Vintage; April, 1991)

the case of the administrator at the University of California who sought to ban such phrases as "a chink in the armor," "a nip in the air" and "call a spade a spade" because they contain words that might offend minorities if used in another context.

But is it fair to dismiss the movement for such extreme examples? Kerry O'Brien says no.

A senior at UT and a supporter of the campus reform movement, Ms. O'Brien is on the defensive these days. "We are not thought police," she says.

At its root, multiculturalism is a philosophy of inclusion that aims to correct centuries of unfairness. There's no tyranny in that, she says.

White males — especially the ones in college administrations and in the media — feel threatened by the opening of education because they're not sure where they fit in.

"A lot of times, their initial reaction is, 'There's no place for me in multiculturalism,'" Ms. O'Brien said. "It takes about five seconds to realize there's a place for everyone."

Campus reformers say they don't want to purge all the Good Old Boys — just those who have overstayed their welcome. And they want to make sure that those who remain have a diverse crowd to hang out with.

Duke Ellington might be a solid choice to replace fellow composer Charles Ives, for example. But even if Ellington's importance flags in 20 years, reformers say, students are still better off for having studied the music of a top African-American artist.

Aside from worrying about "chinks in the armor" and "nips in the air," campus liberals say there are serious, fundamental issues of discrimination in everyday campus life that need to be addressed.

Hate crimes against gay, black and Jewish students are on the rise. At UT, racial epithets have been spray-painted and Sambo caricatures have been paraded on campus in recent years.

In such a climate, is it a bad idea to ban verbal assaults and inconsi-

derate jokes aimed at minorities? Is it sensitive or silly to ban a fraternity party, as Brown University did, because of its "South of the Border" Mexican theme?

More than 200 colleges have adopted speech restrictions in their attempts to stem harassment of minorities. But more recently, an unlikely coalition of free-speech liberals and anti-P.C. conservatives have built strong opposition to the trend.

When the Student Senate at Southern Methodist University passed an anti-discrimination rule banning the harassment of gays and lesbians this month, some students argued that they were on shaky legal ground.

All agreed that the bigger question — Does political correctness compromise free speech? — should be reviewed next year.

of the movement remain difficult to gauge.

Is campus life becoming more diverse or more conformist? Will discrimination subside or will free speech be muffled? Will scholarship

shift toward a more enlightened agenda or just a more liberal one?

No one denies the need for reform.

While students bicker about vocabulary and reading lists, some say the larger goals in the campus diversity movement have been ignored. Statistically, women and minorities are underrepresented in university administrations. And African-American and Hispanic-American students remain in short supply in college classrooms.

Those issues were among the reform movement's earliest concerns. But they are often forgotten in the sudden frenzy to change the way we think, read and speak, P.C. skeptics say.

In 1787, Good Old Boy Thomas Jefferson said, "A little rebellion now and then is a good thing."

In 1960, P.C.P. Gwendolyn Brooks wrote: "First fight. Then fiddle."

Now, some P.C. proponents worry that if they don't start fiddling, their achievements will be lost. Before long, it might be P.C. to be anti-P.C.