

Political Correctness: On How to Begin the Discussion

by Manfred Stanley



It goes without saying that asking people who are in passionate disagreement to pause while you frame their conflict in new ways, is a thankless if not a presumptuous undertaking. “Get down here in the pits with us, if you want, but don’t presume to tell us what we’re ‘really’ arguing about.” Foolhardy or sentimental as it may seem, it appears to me vital that we do cease fighting about political correctness long enough to find out what it is about the topic that we can agree on. Not doing that generates unnecessary pain.

In what follows I give the topic of political correctness a foundation which I hope will appeal to people who otherwise find themselves on very different sides of this debate(s). I have no quarrel with most of these “sides.” Nor do I expect my perspective to serve as anything more ambitious than a framework within which to begin the discussion of political correctness. That it is only one among a number of possible frameworks goes without saying. But the vituperative, conspiratorial, and confrontational tone with which sides are often taken on this topic suggests a need to think about how best to “begin” the discussion so that there may be some shared sense of what the problem is for which one or another policy of “political correctness” is an alleged solution.

I

For various social and historical reasons, modern American society is experiencing an intensification of what can be called the manufacture of social strangers. Reasons for this include phenomena such as institutional specialization, cultural pluralism, desegregation of many sorts, bureaucratization, migration and immigration, sharp differences in social class-based life chances, and competition for increasingly scarce resources. Such forces have as one of their effects the collectively subjective experience of being increasingly surrounded by strangers, that is, by people who appear to each other as socially and psychically distant — alien, other, exotic, or threatening. (This is nothing new in American history; neither is debate about political correctness. What is new, I think, is the unacceptability of previous ways of dealing with strangerhood and the politics of

conformity, ways that range from government-sponsored “Americanization,” through assimilation, segregation and internal exile, to slaughter. For reason of space, I shall restrict myself to the current scene.)

The rhetoric of political correctness seems to me a response to these conditions, but a response that should be viewed as part of a new form of politics emerging roughly since the 1960s in the U.S. To put that claim in context, we need to remember that, however we may wish to define the essence of politics (it’s a controversial concept), we do experience politics in diverse forms. To provide a context for my suggestion that a new form of politics is emerging, let us quickly review some forms of politics that already exist in our society.

Most familiar is what has been called adversarial democracy, perhaps better known as liberal interest group politics. In this model, social interests regarded as competitive get articulated, negotiated, and mobilized into terms appropriate for partisan party politics (i.e., candidates, platforms, votes, victories, and mandates). Democratic participation is understood largely as detectable manifestations of public opinion (e.g., polls, votes, letters, lobbies, donations). All this is understood to proceed by way of controlled competition between organized and legitimate interest groups operating within mutually acceptable societal arrangements (e.g., the Constitution, the market, political parties, the media, and so forth).

A second model of politics may be called elite public policy formation. Here the main actors are expert consultants, opinion leaders and media, think tanks, technical government agencies, academic public policy institutes, and foundations. In this model, politics is the responsible exercise of delegated or professional responsibility in the name of broadly defined public values that must be concretized under conditions of competition for scarce resources and uncertainty about relevant facts. Democratization here signifies the desire and the effort to bring the broader citizenry into this conversation about responsible public management. Policy elites are prone to worry that participation might get out of hand and overload the political system with unmanageable demands. They prefer that citizens participate through responsible formation and expression of public opinion. Currently, the concept of public opinion is broadening to include a pedagogy of value clarification designed to help citizens “work through” their opinions. The idea is to move from simple impulse to considered judgment so as to facilitate a more rational standard of public delegation.

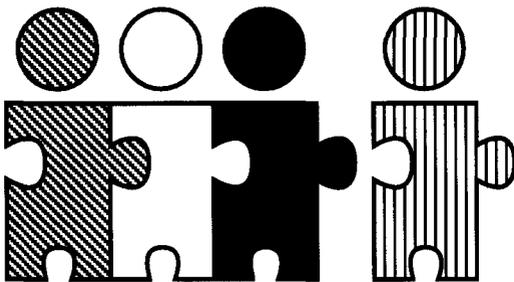
A third model is politics understood as social movements. In this view, politics has to do with the frictions between ideals and actualities that generate the sparks of collective action. Here the rhetoric is about critique, amelioration, progress or restoration, perhaps revolu-



tion, and certainly about organization and solidarity. Social movements “draw” people into public life, give them a vocabulary, redeem their aimless subjectivity through the promise of objective historical “motion” toward some allegedly better world. Social movements can focus on finite interests within an undisturbed status quo, or they can mobilize revolt against part of or the whole of the status quo itself.

There are other models of politics on the American landscape, but the ones I have just reviewed perhaps will serve as a backdrop against which to sketch the newly emerging form of politics which I think best frames the current rhetoric of political correctness. I would like to call it the politics of empathy.

Why call this a new form of politics? Why not think of it as the latest stage of pluralism, the legalistic extreme of our long tradition of tolerance taking the forms of expanded civil rights, curriculum representation, nonstigmatic nomenclature, protected minority designations? But there seems more to it. The politics of empathy transcends tolerance in the name of a more rigorous standard of mutual comprehension. The popular term “inclusion” signifies a growing



demand for policies that reduce the manufacture of social strangers. The live-and-let-live mood of tolerance insufficiently responds to this demand. In several new ways that deserve notice, the politics of empathy concerns itself primarily with the arts of inclusion.

In the new politics of empathy, the focus is on how linguistic habits, social institutions, interaction patterns, and physical arrangements are organized to include or exclude people from publicly valued solidarities such as citizenship, the “intelligent,” the “respectable,” the “clean,” the “qualified,” the “fit,” even “humanity” itself. The rhetoric is largely about estrangement and reconciliation, classification and representation, power and “victimage.” The partisanship connected with topics like political correctness, the curriculum “canon,” the Columbus quincentennial and the like is not the same as that of political parties, public management, or even social movements. The test of solidarity seems less that of shared interest or issue consensus than it is respect for psychic traits and social behavior that supposedly answer to a norm of empathy.

II

Such an abstract account requires illustration from the subjective life of the spirit. Let me therefore close by sharing how, as a Jewish person, I have tried to think and feel my way toward what mutual empathy might require as regards the recently strained relations between some African-Americans and some Jews. (I resist totalizing either population into singular “communities.”) There is no need to

review instances of the painful charges, stereotypes, attributions of conspiracy, and the like that have flowed in both directions. Let me rather set forth how this one individual has tried to think about the requirements of “empathy.”

As a Jewish person, I think I am required to understand that my ethnic culture bears so many traits adaptive to American civilization (bookishness, commercial experience, normative emphasis on education, fountainhead of Christianity, etc.), that we simply are not a “minority” in the same sense as are African-Americans. Jews came to the U.S. as refugees, African-Americans as slaves. Jews stayed as citizens, merchants, scholars, and professionals. Many African-Americans stayed as slaves, and the lives and contributions of those who were freepersons were, until very recently, rendered invisible to other citizens by those responsible for telling the official stories of America. Still today, African-Americans are the object of what must seem to them as zoological debates about I.Q. measurements and definitions of intelligence, which is the idiom often hidden in back of the talk of “qualified blacks.”

As a Jewish person, I think I am required to understand this well enough to comprehend why being despised as a “black” is not the same as being despised as a “Jew.” Why not? Take as one example the occasional use made of the notorious forgery called “The Protocols of the Elders of Zion” by those who want to engage in fantasies of secret Jewish power. Dangerous nonsense? Of course. Yet my sense of how to think about this was permanently altered one day when it occurred to me that, were I a member of a people that had been as decisively barred from the mainstream centers of power as have African-Americans, I might well feel gratified by having attributed to me a power-oriented conspiratorial fantasy like the Protocols. In a linguistic environment where phrases like “Jewish lawyer” and “Jew him down” imply — however offensively — attributions of talent, skill and power, I too might fail to appreciate why such fantasies as the Protocols are so terrifying to Jews. If my people’s contributions to American culture were consistently ignored, truncated, stolen, caricatured or stigmatized, I too might experience Jewish talk of persisting “victimage” as disingenuous.

The politics of empathy imposes some requirements on African-Americans as well. For their part, African-Americans need to understand that the Jews now have a timeless relation to the Holocaust, a dramaturgy of rejection as total as is conceivable. Their imaginations need to be open to what it means for the Jews to have been cast as the all-purpose scapegoat of Western civilization, damned alike as capitalists and as communists, as the chosen people and as Christ killers, as refined snobs and as slovenly ghetto rats, as subversives and as sycophants, as the Elders of Zion and as toxic microbes in the bloodstream of race.

However different, the historical memories of Jews and African-

Americans are united in their experience of “Western civilization” as something more contradictory and lethal than the majestic “mainstream” so beloved by cultural conservatives. Yet while our critique of that civilization emanates from our resistance as people who have been colonized, enslaved or murdered, many aspects of that critique are in the name of values and institutions indisputably the product of Western civilization.

Merely noting such generalizations, of course, is an insufficient basis for final civic reconciliation across the boundaries of stereotype. There needs to be the kind of sustained mutual sensitivity to the distinct experiences I’ve tried briefly to illustrate here. This is what I mean by the politics of empathy. And this, to bring the point home, is where the rhetoric of political correctness ought really to begin — not free speech, not McCarthyism, not merit. It’s about how things “sound” in the light of history. If we don’t begin with that, then every inflection will become suspect until our sensibilities unravel into an infinity of “affronts,” leaving in their wake a social landscape of formulas, lawsuits, and quotas. With the right beginning, we may dare to hope that other issues implicit in the rhetoric of political correctness will find their proper place.

Community and Group Identity: Fostering Mattering

by Daryl G. Smith



As campuses have engaged in the difficult dialogues surrounding diversity and multiculturalism, the concept of community emerges as one of the most elusive yet potentially important topics of discussion.

I see in the dialogues that occur, tremendous tension between those who call for a community of shared values and those who argue for the role of various groups on campus who support issues of diversity. The calls for community seem to have an important element of fear, often deep-seated, about “balkanization” on campus — the perception that student life on campus is highly segregated and isolated. At the same time, there is fear that hard-won efforts to create intellectual and support centers fostering diversity will be eradicated in some homogenized form of community. Some argue for the *Pluribus* and others for the *Unum* (Wong 1992, Cortés 1991, D’Souza 1991).

If institutions are to meet the challenge and the opportunities presented by increasingly diverse communities, it is clear that how we conceive of our institutions needs to be clarified. The angry rhetoric about balkanization (and even worse, “tribalism”), mostly focused on the existence and development of numerous support groups on campus, suggests that the choice must be between a unitary community of homogeneous “shared” values or isolation of individuals and groups. Framing the dialogue in this way ignores the segregated history of campuses in which groups were excluded or isolated by those in the majority, ignores the ways in which campuses continue to be inhospitable to those who are different, and serves to ignore the way in which support for both individual and group identities can create richly diverse communities that function effectively.

I begin with three assumptions: first, that institutions will need to have some core understandings that allow the institution to function; second, that learning occurs best when students are involved in their education through classes, subject matter, and institutional affiliations; and third, that the creation of multicultural communities has important implications for the society as well as to higher education.

Nevertheless, the form and function of involvement and the development of community must be understood as multidimensional