

## **Who Watches the Watchmen? The Evils of Identity Politics in Academic Life** *February 2005 - Rejected by the Western News, presumably for ideological reasons.*

The leaders of the postmodern academy have spent the last two decades wallowing in the mire of two huge and stinky piles of ideological muck – identity politics and politically correct liberalism. These watchmen and watchwomen have supported a public discourse and hiring policies that are hostile to individual rights while being tied to rather dubious notions of collective rights and collective guilt. Yet those strange ideas are rarely brought into the public light since politically correct liberalism has achieved such a powerfully hegemonic position within North American universities that its critics are automatically rejected from teaching positions, or silenced by threats of being fired or denied tenure once there.

What is identity politics? It's the notion that one's biological traits, which are largely unchangeable, define one's being and one's politics. A person is, in essence, their biology. Further, questions of freedom and equality are always framed in terms of membership in a given biological group, with some such groups being defined in their very essence as "oppressors," others as "oppressed." The opposite of identity politics is the more old-fashioned liberalism of individual rights as laid out in such documents as the Magna Carta, the American Constitution, the French Declaration of Rights of 1789, and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (though even the latter contains some exceptions to the rule of the supremacy of individual rights).

Identity politics, in the forms of rabid nationalism, ethnic violence, religious schisms and genocides, is responsible for most of the mass killings of the last century, from two world wars and the Armenian Genocide of 1915 to the massacre in Rwanda in 1994 and

the current problems in the Middle East. At its most basic, identity politics seeks to accelerate the tribalism which seems inherent in the human character.

People seem naturally to identify with and seek out the company of others who are physically “like” them. Hence friendships are usually between those of the same age group, race, religion (or lack thereof), and sometimes sex. Conversely, people tend to be instinctively repelled by physical differences. Some cases in point from campus life: on my sociological forays on the local public transit system AKA taking the bus to school, I’ve noted time and time again that students will consistently avoid sitting in empty seats besides senior citizens, preferring to stand to avoid the “contamination” of close contact with an “old” person.

Second, even in the relatively tolerant, openly liberal environment of the modern university, young people will form themselves spontaneously into social groups based on their racial and religious identities. I remember during my doctoral studies at the University of Waterloo in the 1990s walking into the cavernous student center and seeing crowds of undergraduates spontaneously dividing themselves into tribal clusters centered on groups of comfy chairs – the black students in one group, the East Asians there, the South Asians here, the students of British and European descent (let’s just call them “Euros”) over there. Some of this is language. But most of it is our instinctual tribalism.<sup>1</sup>

The most extreme forms of tribalism lead to blood and death. Witness the long and dreary fight between Israel and her Arab neighbors. Politically correct liberals expend great energy condemning this or that abuse of one side or the other, often slipping into that most eternal of Western social diseases, anti-Semitism. Yet this conflict will never end as long as

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<sup>1</sup> I will use principally Canadian examples in this paper since these are the ones I know best, though much of what I have to say also applies to the US and other Western nations.

Arabs and Jews define themselves as two mutually exclusive tribes claiming the same patch of ground (though to be fair, Israel is to date the only functioning democracy in the region, the only state that accords women full civil rights).

Tribalism also creates religious and ethnic hatreds within states. Ask Martin Luther King, Steve Biko and Theo van Gogh about this – oh wait a minute, you can't: they're dead. By the way: Dr. King wanted a color-blind society, a not ghettoized affirmative action.

Naturally, the most fervent defenders of identity politics on university campuses a generation ago were the radical feminists, who saw patriarchy as an all-encompassing Force lead by Darth Vaderish men determined to keep all women everywhere in positions of subservience. Being a woman meant by definition being oppressed, regardless of the car you owned, the house you lived in, your income, your education, or in many cases the color of your skin (note that at least in America, almost all Second Wave feminists were white bourgeois women). And not surprisingly – cue the kettle drums and ominous trumpet blasts – being a man meant being an oppressor, except in the case of the most pliant types (enter the violins) with tears in their eyes and a thousand “mea culpas!” on their lips. Fortunately, the bizarre claims of the likes of Andrea Dworkin and Mary Daly have fewer and fewer admirers today, as third wave feminists no longer define men *per se* as their collective enemies.

Identity politics is directly tied to the culture of victimization. An absurd example of this culture was an August 2006 news report on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation about a Montreal man who read the *Gazette* (the local English-language newspaper) and thought he had won the lottery. The newspaper had printed the wrong lottery numbers. After finding out the mistake, the poor gent was all aflutter, claiming he couldn't go into work because of heart problems. He was a victim of bad typesetting. So within days he

filed a law suit against the paper for redress. Was he a victim? Or simply a fool for pinning his hopes for happiness on lottery tickets?<sup>2</sup>

The basic premise of politically correct liberalism is that by speaking and writing in warm and fuzzy ways about sex, race, religion, and other aspects of identity politics, we as a society can somehow achieve real social equality. Politically correct liberalism uses distortions of reality in order to obscure real differences between people, or to paper over cracks in the wall of social inequality with a thin layer of linguistic wallpaper. Examples abound: couples are no longer husband and wife, boyfriends, girlfriends, or lovers, but “partners.” What’s the nature of their partnership? Writing books together? Co-owning a flower shop? Playing on the same curling team? Sleeping together? Or some combination of these things? Who really knows – and in most cases, who really cares?

And sometime in the last two decades Indians, Pakistanis, Afghans, Vietnamese, Chinese, Koreans, and the many other peoples living on the world’s largest continent merged into that nebulous mass that politically correct liberalism calls “Asians.” This despite the fact that the older ethnic terms weren’t generally meant as ethnic slurs. Once again politically correct types ignore the huge differences between Indian Hindus, Tibetan Buddhists, and secular Japanese - to choose three cultural groups out of a hat – by referring to all of them with the same vague term, one which throws over a billion people with a diverse series of cultures into one huge semantic basket.

Of course, most of the ardent supporters of politically correct liberalism live in the suburbs, drive nice cars, and have never felt the sting of real poverty. Their revolution is one of words and questionable hiring policies.

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<sup>2</sup> This is not to deny the fact that there are real victims of violence, racism and poverty in the world. My point is simply that by lowering the bar for “victimhood” we cheapen the plight of real victims.

Affirmative action in the academy is a case in point of the excesses of politically correct liberalism allied to identity politics. Its role is rather different in Canada than the US. South of the border affirmative action is largely an attempt to overcome racism against blacks. Yet in Canada, where the percentage of black people is far smaller, affirmative action in universities is much more tied to radical feminist politics.

We should distinguish three types of equity in academic hiring. First, we can call hiring based purely on qualifications which is blind to race, sex, age, and other biological traits “fair” hiring. Second, there’s “soft” affirmative action, where in cases of two candidates having identical or very similar qualifications, jobs go to women or ethnic minorities until they achieve a reasonable level of representation, at which point “fair hiring” takes over. Third, there’s “hard” affirmative action, where women and ethnic minorities are hired over others regardless of their respective qualifications. This third form of affirmative action is immoral and corrupt.<sup>3</sup>

Given current sociological realities, hard affirmative action is guilty of four sins. It hypocritically attacks a moral principle that is – and one imagines always will be – at the center of academic life. It actively supports identity politics, yet doesn’t take into account the important social changes of the last generation which have economically benefited some biological groups much more than others. It sacrifices a large group of people for reasons of a collective historical guilt that living individuals are almost entirely innocent of. And it echoes Nazi and other fascist racial policies, albeit in a reversed form.

The moral principle I’m talking about is the principle of just deserts. No, this isn’t a policy of having only chocolate sundaes and strawberries and cream for dinner, as yummy

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<sup>3</sup> By “corruption” I mean simply using public money – in the case of universities, mostly student tuition and taxes – for private purposes. These purposes are ones the vast majority of contributors never consented to, nor would they consent to them if they were widely known.

a policy as this would be, but the notion that people should get the economic and social rewards they “deserve” based on their inherent skills, including intelligence, hard work, dedication, and commitment. Further, it says that we should ignore irrelevant factors such as race, age, sex, religion and class. We professors tell our students, either explicitly or implicitly, that the grades we give them are based on a combination of amount of work and basic research and writing skills. Those with the best grades can go on top graduate school and perhaps become professors themselves.

Yet when it comes to hiring new professors, the principle of just deserts is thrown out the window. People are hired based on their youth, sex or race rather than the most extensive qualifications. That’s what affirmative action is: choosing to hire someone you KNOW isn’t as qualified as others applying to the position in order to support the collective rights of groups defined as “oppressed,” while punishing other groups due to the collective guilt you’ve assigned them. This is hypocrisy of the highest order. Imagine a classroom where a professor assigned grades based purely on the sex or race of her students, giving black women an “A”, Latino women a “B”, and white males a “C”, regardless of the work they handed in. Such a practice would bring howls of outrage from all and sundry.

It would be all too easy to provide a number of specific examples from the many cases of dubious affirmative action hires done over the last two decades in Canadian universities, but I have it on good authority that to do so would open up the possibility of libel suits (not to mention putting me on any number of blacklists). Instead we’ll look at a fictionalized collage of the type of hirings typically done in politically correct Humanities and Social Science departments by visiting the Theosophy Department at a Prominent Canadian University (PCU). This collage is based on a number of specific factual cases.

Twelve years ago, in 1996, the Theosophy Department was dominated by about a dozen or so white males hired in the sixties and seventies nearing the end of their careers who felt a slight twinge of guilt about being so white and so male. That being the case, they listened to the two second-wave feminists in the department that they embark on a stringent program of affirmative-action hiring. They also decided they needed some “new blood,” so they opted to avoid hiring candidates with extensive teaching experience and publication lists since they were obviously “set in their ways” and wouldn’t “fit” the department’s needs (i.e. they were too old or would make the tenured faculty who had rested on their publishing laurels some time in the seventies look bad).

Provided with plenty of cash from PCU’s faculty renewal fund, the Theosophers hired ten new faculty over the last decade. Two were established scholars from the USA with credible publication records, one male, one female. The male hire had even published a book, unlike any of the other new faculty. Five were doctoral students with no publication records and minimal teaching experience (four of these being women), the other three recent graduates averaging two published articles and one year’s teaching experience (two of these are women). Overall the Theosophers hire seven women and three men with an average age of 32, dropping to 29 if you throw out the two “credible” hires. Of these ten, two are East Asian, the other eight white; all of them are from middle or upper-class families. Their “open” job calls bring in 200-250 applications, with about two-thirds of these being candidates with complete Ph.D.s and at least a year’s worth of teaching experience. The hiring committee systematically throws out applications from older white males when making affirmative action hires to make sure that the young women they want hired have no credible competition during the job interviews and talks. None of these

men complain, fearing retribution. Six of the seven women hired are quite fetching, improving the aesthetics of the Department immeasurably.

So why are such hiring decisions made? Mainly to fulfill the ideological program of politically correct liberalism, notably its promotion of identity politics. There are other reasons too. For one thing, young inexperienced academics are more fearful of losing their jobs and thus more politically pliable. Thirdly, I have it on good authority that some faculty members apply the “principle of envy.” This principle states that “I shall not hire anyone with a significantly better publication or teaching record than me because it will make me look bad when my name comes up for tenure or promotion.” Lastly, fetching young women are sometimes hired for their “aesthetic” qualifications: I’ve seen myself the sickening sight of senior male faculty fawning over a newly hired young faculty member as she makes corrections to her incomplete doctoral thesis. There’s nothing wrong with appreciating beauty, though perhaps we need some affirmative action for the “aesthetically challenged” too!

Yet politically correct liberalism is not only guilty of identifying a person’s essence with their biology. It is guilty of three more sins: of ostrich sociology, of a dubious notion of collective guilt, and of an unwitting but all the same unholy ideological alliance with fascism.

One inescapable sociological fact of the last two decades is the rising social and economic clout of women. An August 23, 2006 Statistics Canada report featured on CBC radio and TV notes that about one-third of wives in dual-income families now make more than their husbands, while men make on average 16% more than women. Taken out of context, these stats may seem like evidence of sexism against women. Quite the contrary: for one thing, women’s paychecks have steadily increased in North America over the last



three decades. Depending on who you ask, it's now about 79% in the U.S. Further, the argument that these figures represent endemic sexism against women ignores two rather huge elephants sitting in the corner.

For one thing, look around any given shopping mall or fast-food restaurant: the majority of workers in these places are women working at or near minimum wage. The post-industrial capitalist service economy relies on underpaid women's work to function.

As for university life, let's look at my own university, The University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, Canada. UWO's Provost office published a report in January 2000 on gender and hiring between 1991 and 1999. Here's the facts: 23.2% of the pool of job applicants in this period were women. But 30.4% of those interviewed and 36.2% of those hired were female. Overall, a given female applicant had a 5.4% chance of being given a job, with a given male having only a 2.9% chance. So Jennifer Jones had almost twice the chance of being hired at Western than her brother John. And these figures are skewed down by the paucity of women in the physical sciences: in the humanities, the percentages for women were much higher.

These figures are no doubt understatements of the growing place of women in the university. Over the last six years a number of departments on Western's campus have accelerated aggressive programs to hire women to point where in some cases they represent half or more of full-time faculty, despite being a minority of job applicants overall.

What do you call it when an organization systematically favours one sex over the other in the hiring process? Let's see... flipping through my dictionary... I believe this is called "sexism"! Women who have gotten to the doctoral level are now a privileged class in

academe, having two-to-three times better odds of getting a tenure-track job than a man with the same qualifications (and probably ten times the odds if the man is middle-aged).

The two elephants in the corner overlooked by politically correct liberals are the realities of the tenure system and family life. A young man hired in 1970 and granted tenure a few years later could still be a full-time faculty member 35 years later: the tenure system guarantees that gender and racial imbalances can't change overnight. Secondly, PC liberals ignore how freely chosen life decisions, such as those of women in their late 20s who drop out of academic life to marry and raise a family, have a dramatic effect on the composition of the faculty. Of course, the idea that an educated woman would put aside her career to raise children irritates academic feminists to no end.

A Statistics Canada "Daily" from February 2005 clarifies the situation even further. Between 1990 and 2003, the number of full-time female university teachers "jumped by over 50%." In contrast, male faculty dropped by 14% in the same period. The Daily from October 11, 2005 reports that 60% of the degrees, diplomas and certificates awarded by universities in 2003 were given to women. This drops to 52% of master's degrees and 41% of doctorates, though women still earned 53% of all post-graduate degrees and diplomas in 2003. A good guess as to why there's a drop-off from masters to PhD degrees is that as women hit their late twenties they marry and have children, social realities not likely to be changed by affirmative action programs. Some of these women make the decision to be full-time moms instead of full-time academics, for which we can hardly blame them.

It's clear that women now dominate the undergraduate classroom, and that this domination has filtered into a significant number of graduate programs e.g. psychology, sociology, the languages and literature. I've taught social science classes where 90% of my students were female, where a medium-sized lecture hall contains dozens of young women

and three young men, two of whom never talk. And given the fact that young males often spend the first year or three of their undergraduate careers crippled by excess booze and testosterone, this domination of women is likely to increase in future.

Further, some ethnic groups have benefited from changing social conditions far more than others. Young East Asians on university campuses often come from affluent backgrounds, and are generally no more “underprivileged” than their Euro counterparts. In my experience East Asian students have an excellent work ethic, better than most Euro undergraduates – far more East Asian women have gotten top marks in the various arts and social sciences courses I’ve taught than their small numbers in these programs would merit. This isn’t to say that they don’t suffer from some residual racism outside the university, but we’re a far cry from the Chinese head-tax of the early twentieth century or the internment camps for Japanese-Canadians built during World War II.

Ignoring these social changes is ostrich sociology, sticking your head in the sand to avoid coming to grips with threats to your ideological worldview. If supporters of identity politics really wanted to deal with the complex interrelation between race and class which condemns some people to physical labor or service industry jobs and others to professional careers, they would promote the hiring of working-class blacks, natives and (given recent events) South Asian Moslems, who are rarely seen in the university classroom. Of course, class is the invisible but most powerful determinant of who winds up in the factory or food court and who winds up in the boardroom or behind a lectern. Yet no affirmative action hiring programs address this deepest cause of social inequality.

One common practice by politically correct liberals is to hire foreign professors from countries where English isn’t the first language to get a hit of that warm feeling of moral superiority. It goes without saying that all universities should encourage atmospheres of

racial tolerance. But one of the most common complaints I've overheard from undergraduate students, especially in the sciences, is against TAs and lecturers whose English language skills are poor. Hiring non-English speakers to teach in university is like hiring a doctor who has learned medicine from watching hospital shows on TV. Fluency in the language of the land should be an absolutely essential criterion for all academic hiring, a criterion that should stand above ideological debates about identity politics.

Speaking out against racism and sexism on university campuses in 1958 was a brave act. Doing so in 2008 is about as risky as putting on your shoes in the morning. That's because there really aren't nefarious cabals of racists and sexists lurking in back rooms smoking Cubans and plotting to restore patriarchy or the British Empire. Given this, politically correct liberals justify affirmative action by the claim that Euro males are collectively guilty of oppressions of the past, whether it's imperialism, slavery or the nuclear family. "Sacrifices must be made," says the PC liberal – "you can't make an omelet without cracking a few eggs." Yet the eggs being cracked – the current generation of Euro males, especially older ones from more humble class backgrounds – are 99% of the time entirely innocent of these past oppressions. This logic of collective guilt has been used many times in the past by world leaders to justify the cruelest of acts – Hitler and the Jews, Stalin and the kulaks, Mao and the Tibetans. It's irrational nonsense. Why is it resurfacing now?

Fourthly, there is just a whiff of neo-fascism in hard affirmative action. Nazi racial eugenicists and racial "scientists" were fond of making charts and diagrams of various types of body shapes and facial features to illustrate the supposed superiority of the "Master Race" to non-Aryans, notably their enemies the Slavs and the Jews. Today equity bureaucrats perform a Nietzschean revaluation of values, promoting a reversed and

distorted version of the fascist racial order, creating complex lists of the now-favoured ethnic groups that look like a photographic negative of the Nazi list (except perhaps the Jews, who always get screwed). Ironically, the fascists and the supporters of hard affirmative action agree on one vital point: one's biology defines one's being.

Naturally, academic hirings are very secretive affairs: letters of reference, CVs and shortlists are by no means meant to be general public knowledge. Academics are brilliant at rationalizing bad behavior, justifying age discrimination and reverse sexism with phrases such as "he really didn't fit our department's needs" or the wonderfully tautological "he wasn't what we were looking for." Deans rubber stamp these decisions, while equity officers, the commissars of identity politics on campuses, enthusiastically cheer them on. And undergraduate students are largely ignorant of these shenanigans, happy to attend their classes without getting involved in departmental debates.

In some cases affirmative action is a corrupt use of public funds to support policies few outside the academy are aware of. In Canada, the money paid to professors comes from the state (and thus public taxes) and student tuition, yet those making hiring decisions show very little responsibility to either the public good or student well being. Almost all students will want the best teachers and researchers money can buy, yet affirmative action purposely avoids giving them these. Further, most young people will tell you they don't want to be hired purely because of their chromosomes or skin colour, so those hired under the tokenism of identity politics aren't especially the best role models. The fact that 60% of Canadian university students are now women shows that even a supposedly "patriarchal" academy can put sexual discrimination to rest.

The late lamented former Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau fought his own battle against identity politics in trying to defend the Canadian federal state against the entropic

forces of Quebec nationalism. Though we should never fall into a mood of complacency, Canadian federalism is to be congratulated as a successful system of rough-and-ready compromises between regions and founding peoples, the British, French and native. And for the most part Canada has been more successful than European countries in integrating immigrant cultures into its social fabric. We have no Jean-Marie Le Pen, no major neo-Nazi groups. Yet university leaders seek to import the snarling dogs of identity politics onto campuses which we as a society have kept at bay.

Affirmative action as currently practiced is based on moral hypocrisy, bad sociology, collective guilt, and an analogy to fascist racial science. It should be ended immediately. In its place professors should actively encourage minority groups and women to go to graduate school, publish and teach, earning their spurs fair and square, promising everyone an atmosphere of non-discrimination when it comes to making hiring decisions.

Who watches the watchmen? At present, no one.