

Literature Lost: Social Agendas and the Corruption of the Humanities  
John M. Ellis

Did you get the license of the truck that ran over you?

It's an old-time jest when somebody is blindsided, knocked flat, dazed and confused. That was my reaction entering a graduate school of education after 40 years in business. Foucault who?

It is a whole raft of PC truck and amazing license with the facts and the methodology of research, an immense gulf between theories of how people are and one's real-life experience. Ellis provides the service of describing, cataloging, and providing a history and analysis of the race-gender-class theories driving political correctness. My goal is to extract Cliff notes of the major concepts to share here and for my own reference.

The most fundamental dichotomy is between humanity and society. People and the institutions they have built. PC sides with Rousseau in believing that people in a state of nature are fundamentally good but that society has corrupted them. If "man is born free, yet everywhere in chains," somebody is to blame. Political correctness, like Marxism which preceded it, is a blame game. It theorizes that a conspiracy based on race (white), gender (male), sexual persuasion (straight) and class (the capitalists) to exploit, demean, and abuse everybody else. Mankind will only be free when the millennium arrives and these "hegemonists" and the societies they have built are swept away to be replaced by new, shining, ideal institutions.

Rousseau's view inspired the French and Russian revolutions. Hobbes, Locke and the other philosophers who inspired ours took the opposite view. They hold that man is inherently selfish, and that we need the social contract and governments to hold our worsen nature in check.

Society is not and never will be perfect. Nonetheless, looking around one can see that today's European or American enjoys more opportunity, wealth, health and other good things of life than any of his ancestors or any other societies on earth. It isn't perfection, but it is also not to be lightly discarded, nor certainly to be despised for its putative failings.

Ellis blames careerism for the curious fact that literary critics now tend to propound theories in the realms of philosophy, psychology, political science and sociology, and at the same time appear to have become indifferent to the aesthetics of literature itself. Critics find little new to be said about world's body of great literature, which has been analyzed ad nauseam. On the other hand there are exciting things happening elsewhere in academia. An academic career has to be based on fresh ideas, and the only place to find them is outside the field. Ellis enumerates borrowings from physics, anthropology and elsewhere, the authors of which often disown the half-baked theories literary critics have spun from their research.

Careerism alone does not fully explain political correctness. There is the traditional disdain of the academic for the common man, and the traditional ivory-tower intellectual's inclination towards radicalism. The softer side of academia is also prone to embrace intellectual fads. Communism, existentialism, Oriental religions, Leary's dope philosophy and Scientology held sway when I was at Cal in the '60s. Some stuff Ellis talks about, such as critical race studies, feminism and queer theory, are more recent.

Ordinary intuition tells you that there are logical flaws in the politically correct bilge coming out of the academy. Ellis' service is to apply a nomenclature to their pretentious nonsense.

The Genetic fallacy is the notion that one's genetic makeup affects external reality, as in, "It's a black thing... you wouldn't understand." It drives the notion that only women can be professors of Women's Studies, blacks of Black Studies, etc. Scholarship does not rely on its own internal consistency and being independently verifiable and reproducible -- Francis Bacon's ideas formalized by John Locke during the Enlightenment -- but on the genetic makeup of the researcher.

The Intentionality fallacy claims that a literary text does not speak for itself. Instead, it is the author's intent that matters. Needless to say this is taken as a license to practice retroactive psychoanalysis and discover -- O!, shock! -- that straight white male authors had none but despicable intentions and misogynistic views of women and gloated in their superiority over other races.

The Affective fallacy holds that what matters is not the text itself but the reader's affect upon reading the text. Since this will surely vary from reader to reader, the text itself therefore lacks any intrinsic qualities apart from the very words themselves. It is meaningless to look for a common interpretation of the text. Presumably by this reading even allegory, metaphor and imagery are ruled out; certainly some readers will be ignorant of the referents.

One of Ellis' recurrent themes is that the race-gender-class theorists are thoroughly inconsistent. On the one hand they agree with the deconstructionists that any text, any reality, can be only be studied as a collection of minute parts, the relationships among which disappear in the deconstruction. No relationships, no constructed meaning. Or conversely, all meaning is constructed, chacun à son goût, at the whim of the author. In any case there is no permanent, transcendent meaning to anything. Or morality or anything else. But yet, yet the race-gender-class advocates theorizes there are some eternal truths, among them the malevolent intent of certain types of people towards other types.

Ellis returns again and again to the Enlightenment. What is unique about Europeans is not that they practiced slavery - everybody did that and many still do. but that western societies were the only ones to abandon the practice, and they did it on moral grounds, against their own economic interests. Societies throughout history have attempted to dominate one another. Once again, it was Europeans and Americans, following Enlightenment philosophy, who abandoned their attempts to build empire. In fact, the value of equality that underlies race-gender-class theory is a direct product of the Enlightenment. The difference is only a matter of degree. Theory paints issues in black and white. They tolerate no gradual transitions or residual inequalities. Theory would sweep away today's society, despite the considerable advances over where it was, and its considerably more equitable treatment of racial, class and gender minorities than other societies, in the attempt to replace it with a radically new and improved society. The theorists have learned nothing from the French revolution, and are both tragic and comic in their attempts to explain away the failures of Marxism and Communism.

Employing a Hegelian term of which the Marxists are fond, Ellis says that the PC crowd preaches historically but judge ahistorically. They judge American actions at the 1789 Constitutional Convention in the light of modern PC standards. Yet they give the savagery of genital mutilation, slavery and intertribal genocide in today's third world a pass.

Theorists claim that the "truths" of the literature of dead white males are invalid. Ellis question is, "what truths?" He contends that literature does not attempt to express eternal verities so much as eternal questions. In doing so it is almost always regarded with suspicion by the powers that be. Literature such as Madame. Bovary, Candide, Gulliver's Travels, On the Road, Animal Farm, Huckleberry Finn and in fact almost any great work that comes to mind, tends to challenges orthodoxies more than establish them.

Tenaciously held theory supports action, not analysis. Action is antithetical to the purposes of the University: research and debate in an atmosphere of intellectual freedom. Activism implies dedication to a cause, hence an outcome, and hence rejection of research that doesn't support the activists' theses. Activists shout down their foes, subjecting them to withering ad hominem attacks rather than logically rebutting their points. Larry Summers treatment by the women of Harvard is a classic example.

Ellis concludes with the sad prognosis that the corruption is now so deeply engrained in the Universities, with whole departments dedicated to race-class-gender issues, that it will be around for a long time. I propose it is the AIDS of the meme community; it has compromised its hosts' defenses (American universities) to the point that they may never shake it. I shudder to imagine the consequences to the country when the United States loses its leading position within the global scholarly community.