H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

John K. Wilson. *The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education.* Durham: Duke University Press, 1995. 220 pp. $21.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8223-1713-5; $54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8223-1703-6.

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Published on H-Pol (February, 1997)

...in response to the ten thousand wrongs of the American slave, you would enforce the strictest silence. – Frederick Douglass, 7/4/1852[1]

In this well-written and well-researched short volume, John K. Wilson takes upon himself the task of defending all liberals and leftists in the academy against the charge that they are imposing an oppressive "political correctness" (PC) that stifles academic freedom and free expression on campus, indoctrinates students with radical ideologies, and promotes intolerance of any dissent from the right. Wilson is well equipped for his task. As the editor of *Democratic Culture*, the newsletter of Teachers for a Democratic Culture, and as a graduate student at the University of Chicago, he claims to have "some insight into the darker side of academic life" (p. 159). To his personal experiences, Wilson adds thorough journalistic investigations of a large number of notorious cases of PC oppression, each of which is well told and documented. The result is a solid rebuttal of books like Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* (NY: Vintage, 1992).

Wilson's response to the conservative criticisms has two parts. First he exposes political correctness as a "myth" built up from distortions, anecdotes, and untruths. Second, he constructs a counter-case that the real threat to academic freedom comes from the right–that a "conservative correctness" reigns instead. The notion of *myth* is central to Wilson's overall thesis. He does not claim that incidents of political correctness–intolerance of conservative views by liberal and leftist faculty and students–never occur. They do, and Wilson documents several clear cases. But political correctness is a myth because these and other isolated incidents, many misreported or distorted by repetition, are taken as representative evidence of a repressive campus environment. "The distinguishing mark of a myth," he quotes Walter Lippmann,"is that truth and error, fact and fable, report and fantasy, are all on the same plane of credibility" (p. 2). Given this standard, political correctness is indeed a myth.

In his introductory chapter, Wilson outlines the key elements of the myth- creation process and the history of the PC idea. Two techniques are central to myth-creation. First is the repetition and distortion of anecdotes. Perhaps the most extreme example of distortion concerned a 1991 incident at the State University of New York at Binghamton in which a talk by a conservative speaker was disrupted by a single student. The *Wall Street Journal* reported that the speech was interrupted by a "mob." In later reports, the "mob" was numbered at two-hundred people, "brandishing sticks and canes" (p. 20-21). The distorted anecdotes can be repeated many times. Wilson counts thirty-five articles and books that recount one case in which a University of Pennsylvania undergraduate publicized an administrator's politically correct comment on a memo she wrote while on a university committee. Interestingly, this is not a true example of political correctness. There is absolutely nothing in this case which would lead one to think that the comment, a clumsy and off-hand effort, was intended as censorship or "thought control": the student was not publicly condemned, punished, or coerced in any way.

The second myth-making technique, and the central element of all PC charges, is "the myth of the conservative victim." In a remarkable turnabout of historical narrative, conservatives managed to portray themselves as "victims of false charges of racism and sexism, victims of the repressive thought police, and victims of reverse discrimination" (p. 16). The exemplar of the conservative victim is Stephan Thernstrom, a Harvard professor who chose to stop teaching a class after being accused of being racially insensitive by some students in 1988 (pp. 17-20). Like many of the other conservative victims identified in the book, such as the UPenn student mentioned above, Thernstrom's victimization is less than overwhelming: he was never punished, his position never threatened, and no one asked that he stop teaching the class (not even the students who criticized him).

Every successful example of anti-PC propaganda out-

lined in the book builds on this motif of the conservative victim. To Wilson, this is the key strategic innovation of a conservative attack on higher education that dates back to the 1960s. So long as conservatives acted only as the aggressor attacking leftists in the academy, they "failed to convince the public of a crisis in higher education" (p. 12). In the late 1980s, with the formation of the National Association of Scholars (1987) and the publication of a series of books beginning with Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 1987), conservative critics began painting a (misleading) public image of repressive conformity and radical domination on college campuses. This effort was well funded by conservative groups such as the Olin Foundation. In the early 1990s, the idea broke into the mainstream media as "political correctness." Wilson cites a NEXIS search that turned up no references to that phrase in 1985 and 65 in 1990, but 1,570 in 1991 and 6,985 in 1994 (p. 8).

The widespread public acceptance of the political correctness myth has become a powerful political tool for conservatives, Wilson argues. It provides a way to dismiss and mock rather than refute claims based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or minority culture. Further, the attack on PC has been expanded to serve in the larger ideological war against the left, so that any statement of radical belief triggers the PC charge. The claim that politically correctness stifles debate has been used to silence liberals and leftists on campus, not to "demand strong and consistent principles of academic freedom everywhere" (p. 32). More serious still, highly publicized accusations of left-wing intolerance mask a much larger problem of censorship directed at leftists and liberals, a "conservative correctness" that attracts very little media attention. Conservative correctness enforces silence about the hate crime, hate speech, and date rape that is still common on campus. Wilson also outlines what he sees as repression by conservatives at Boston University under John Silber and at Harvard Law School, and widespread discrimination against gays and lesbians.

The central chapters of *The Myth of Political Correctness* review four areas of the PC charge: the attack on the Western canon (Chapter 3); oppressive speech codes (Chapter 4); codes of sexual conduct (Chapter 5); and reverse discrimination (Chapter 6). Each of these cases follows the general pattern described above. First, anecdotal evidence of PC distorted beyond recognition until we are led to the false conclusions that the Western canon is dead, that students fear an offhand remark will lead to false accusations of bigotry, that men on campus fear false accusation of rape, that affirmative action has blocked opportunities for white males. Central too in each story is a conservative victim (Western culture itself in the first case) whom radicalized forces have attacked.

On each of these topics, Wilson refutes the PC accusation by bringing more facts to light and he turns tables on the critics by exposing the conservative bias he sees at work on college campuses. The truth, Wilson writes, is that the classics of Western culture are growing, not shrinking, in curricula around the country. Speech codes are rarely used to punish students. In any case, colleges have always enforced standards of acceptable conduct and will continue to do so, with or without speech codes. Censorship of the student press is a more prevalent problem, but newspapers on the left and right are both affected by student disruptions, such as newspaper theft, and the far more serious problem of official censorship has a decidedly conservative bias. Wilson's discussion of the date rape problem is particularly valuable, including a useful summary of the academic debate between Mary Koss and her conservative critic Neil Gilbert. On this issue, and in the conservative critiques of campus "sex codes" (which produce the most extraordinary hyperboles) and womens" studies programs as well, Wilson reveals a decidedly misogynistic conservative bias. Disturbingly, he makes a strong case. Finally, in his discussion of reverse discrimination, Wilson provides a decent review of the issues surrounding affirmative action.

The raw numbers do most of the work here: white men still dominate academia. His argument that pro-white policies such as legacy preferences affect more students than race-based affirmative action is weaker. The legacy examples are all at very elite institutions (Harvard, Dartmouth), leading me to question the generality of the claim. Wilson urges his readers not to assign to affirmative action too much responsibility for racial tensions on campus. As with gender, his position here is very broad: "It is the mere presence of a substantial number of minority students, not their SAT scores, that sparks racism" (p. 152).

Wilson articulates my own inchoate reading of political correctness on campus. Like Wilson, and I suspect many readers of this review as well, I have spend many years on various college campuses without seeing much evidence of an ominous, repressive political correctness. Yes, there have been demonstrations spurred by demands for greater racial or gender equality. But the very nature of these demonstrations belies the myth of political correctness. Seeking to attract public attention to their cause, demonstrators apply pressure on college administrators from the *outside* . If the radicals controlled

the campus, as the PC critics claim, then they would not need to affect policy by such external and unconventional means. "Politics by other means" is the tool employed by those who are excluded from traditional avenues of political power.

What I found myself looking for in this book was a deeper explanation of the conservative reaction. As noted above, Wilson at one point says that the PC attack is a direct outgrowth of the conservative reaction to the radical impulses and campus disruptions of the 1960s (p. 10). Later, he makes the more general claim that the elements of the PC attack reflect a "fear of a changing culture" (p. 158). This seems closer, but too vague to be useful. My concern here is not purely academic. Wilson is attempting in this book to counter a large number of conservative tracts by documenting factual errors made by his opponents and by reassuring readers that the "liberal" positions are not the extreme and threatening ones that they have been made out to be. While this seems like a reasonable strategy, it is likely to fail unless we have a better idea as to why the conservative critique was so well received in the first place. As Wilson shows, even many academic liberals at first accepted the "illiberal education" argument. Though factually wrong, the larger point clearly struck a chord for many. The answer may be quite simple. It may be that the disorder associated with these challenges to the status quo make us, as members of the dominant group, uneasy. Our fear of conflict my be very real, as they were for Frederick Douglass' audience in the quote I offered at the outset. Threatened, even sympathetic audiences counsel patience. In the face of this hesitancy, rational appeals may fail. I close by reminding the reader that, on that day, Douglass despaired of a logical argument. "It is not light that is needed," he said, "but fire."[2]

Notes:

[1]. In Herbert Storing, ed., *What Country Have I?* (NY: St. Martin's Press, 1970) p. 35.

[2]. Ibid., p. 34.

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Citation: Stephen Minicucci. Review of Wilson, John K., *The Myth of Political Correctness: The Conservative Attack on Higher Education.* H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. February, 1997.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=832

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