

Valeri L. Scatamburlo. *Soldiers of Misfortune: The New Right's Culture War and the Politics of Political Correctness.* New York: Peter Lang, 1998. xv + 269 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8204-3012-6.



Reviewed by Barry Alan Shain

Published on H-Pol (December, 1998)

As suggested in the book's subtitle, Professor Scatamburlo examines in this work the politics of political correctness, and does so with an impassioned zeal. In her opening paragraph, she writes that "the Dickensianization of our society is becoming all the more apparent...[while] for countless citizens, the everyday struggles for mere sustenance have been vitiated by the greed of a predatory global capitalism which lurks furtively in search of its next victim" (p. 1). Such strident statements, however, are to be expected, for the author's intent is not to persuade an audience of politically disengaged readers, but instead to cause those already committed to her political outlook to reassess their programmatic strategies. Scatamburlo assures us that the purpose of "this treatise is to draw attention to the need for progressive leftists to reassess their role as public intellectuals and cultural workers and, more important, to rethink the relationship between theory and practice...[and] to find ways to use educational institutions to create social change" (p. 18).

In other words, her examination of political correctness is not for a critical community of

scholars, but rather for those committed to the author's progressive view of American politics, economics, and society. Her goal is to persuade them of the necessity of re-incorporating Marxist analysis into the regnant postmodern paradigms that attend, in her mind too insistently, to gender and race. In truth, then, this book is written neither for a broad scholarly audience nor in a narrow sense about political correctness. Instead, it is a semi-private communication among progressive partisans and is concerned with their having turned away from a life dedicated to political activism and universal values and their instead having turned towards textualism and intellectual and political "fragmentation engendered by various forms of identity politics and multiculturalism" (p. 12). Thus, in keeping with her allegiance to Marx and his most famous thesis on Feuerbach, the author's intent is not to understand political correctness and those who oppose it, but rather to re-shape the political agenda of its errant progressive defenders (pp. 203, 230).

Before addressing in the fourth and final chapter that which she describes as the central

purpose of this text, the author devotes three chapters to attacking various aspects of the contemporary right and their critique of political correctness. This is a discussion which lacks clear purpose and, at best, seems tangential to the author's reported concern with the left's abandonment of Marxism and the universalism and humanism of Enlightenment thought. Quite possibly, though, these three chapters are less about advancing the author's thesis and more about exhibiting to the intended audience the author's progressive credentials by treating with contempt intellectuals on the right. Thus, in the first chapter, the author reviews the history of post-WWII conservatism; in the second, the critique of political correctness mounted principally by neo-conservatives and liberals; and in the third, the author's strained attempt to castigate the media as intellectual agents of a right-wing corporate-sponsored conspiracy.

Although of questionable purpose, her first chapter is, nonetheless, highly readable and generally fair. But if there is a critical claim advanced, it occurs late in the chapter and is where Scatamburlo claims that "what is unprecedented...is the amount of corporate funding underwriting contemporary conservative laments. Given these circumstances, one must identify the recent epidemic of newspaper articles and books about the P.C. menace for what it really is--a by-product of more than two decades of heightened corporate influence in the affairs of academe" (p. 53). And again, in discussing the impotent National Association of Scholars, she questions its commitment "to defend traditional methods and scholarly standards...given the corporate funding that underwrites the organization" (p. 63). She previously had informed us, however, that much of NAS's budget was provided by "the Coors, Olin, Smith-Richardson, Scaife, and Bradley foundations" (p. 62), only one of which can be viewed as a corporate sponsor. This is an issue, however, of importance in Scatamburlo's attempt to link by

whatever means possible the ills of contemporary higher education to corporate capitalism.

Yet, surely, a half-dozen charitable foundations set up by now deceased industrialists does not define or describe contemporary corporate America's political agenda (if such a thing exists). Scatamburlo also willfully ignores that the vast majority of the thousands of charitable foundations, and all of the largest (Ford, Rockefeller, MacArthur, etc.), are committed to liberal or progressive causes. She implausibly assumes that because four or five foundations--which are new and anomalously on the right--are committed to changing the character of American higher education, that they have been successful in doing so. Yet, no evidence is adduced to support this supposition. She is unjustified, then, in associating criticism of political correctness with any particular agenda of American corporate power or the success of the right in drawing the media and the broader American intelligentsia (Schlesinger et al.) into supporting its reactionary agenda. In the end, her unsubstantiated linking of contemporary higher education with corporate capitalism, through the mediation of a handful of conservative foundations, ultimately may have more to do with setting a political agenda than advancing an argument.

In the second chapter, Scatamburlo again strangely goes after the political right in her effort to change the nature of progressive scholarship and political commitment. In particular, she focuses her attention on the shortcomings of four books which gained national attention in the early 1990s for their criticism of American higher education: Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* (1987), Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals* (1991); Camille Paglia's *Sexual Personae* (1991); and Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* (1992). With these works largely in mind, Scatamburlo successfully challenges the claim that a uniform Western canon exists and that its defenders are not politically motivated in their creative recon-

struction of this "tradition" (pp. 95-96). But in cleverly attacking their "championing of a seemingly homogeneous, unproblematic Western tradition" that leaves undisclosed the "decisions which have been made out of an endless array of possibilities" that "inevitably mirror dominant relations of power and privilege," she detracts from her account by describing these works as "preposterous drivel" (pp. 79-80). (And in chapter four, her position will be altogether different.) Yet again, although such excesses may diminish the author's scholarly standing, it may well serve her essential political ends.

This chapter also brings to light a central tension of this work, that is, the author's propensity to confuse liberal (and neo-conservative) opponents of political correctness on the one hand and conservatives on the other. While it may be true that neo-conservative and liberal modernists celebrate the "West" and have a triumphalist view of America, this is not a view endorsed by philosophical conservatives. Indeed, many view the history of the West to be regrettable and they differ only regarding which epoch was the source of all that is currently wrong with America, a nation often viewed with considerable suspicion. But, then again, as a defender of the Enlightenment humanism and modernity, is it any surprise that Scatamburlo prefers to find fault with premodern (or with related postmodern) thought than with liberal celebrators of universalism, humanism, reason, and the certainty of modernity?

Scatamburlo's third chapter, like those that precede it, fails to advance the book's putative thesis but, in addition, it is hardly capable of standing on its own. It suffers, in particular, from Scatamburlo's unwillingness to confront the hegemonic power of the liberal intellectual and creative establishment in the shaping of cultural values, most especially, in the mainline media. To argue, as she does, that the media's pivotal role in creating the crisis of political correctness resulted from its being manipulated by a right-wing con-

spiracy is wholly lacking in credibility. This is especially true when her argument rests on her exploration of a 24 December 1990 issue of *Newsweek* which appeared in advance of the 1991-92 conservative critiques she finds seminal.

Consider, then, how persuasive her right-wing conspiracy account is given that her own evidence demonstrates that the media was driven by liberal concerns and consistently refused to embrace the particular concerns of the right. Indeed, it wasn't until the 1990s and "'the new danger was described as a threat to freedom of thought and speech'" (p. 137) that the media became involved. Without political correctness being viewed as a threat to liberal values, "the menace of P. C. may have remained confined to the paranoid minds of the right-wingers" and the media would never have taken up the issue. For consistently throughout this period "the Right's custodial project of preserving the Western canon and its values, was, for the most part, ignored by the media" (p. 136). Nonetheless, in opposition to her own evidence, Scatamburlo insists on again holding that four or five small- to middle-sized conservative foundations, and two or three prominent Washington think-tanks (that she regularly trots out) and those authors they supported, as ultimately responsible for the media's attack on political correctness (pp. 138-39). Her conclusions, however, are unsustainable and plainly inconsistent with her evidence.

In chapter four, "Theory Wars and Cultural Strife," we finally get to the author's effort to advance the argument which she posited in her introduction as the book's thesis. Oddly enough, given the preceding chapters, we find her now arguing here that the critique of political correctness is defensible and the left's current vulnerability is a reflection of its politically-correct turn to academic theorizing and away from Marx and political organizing. As she writes, "simply castigating a climate of anti-intellectualism for the bad press leftists have received is counterproductive, hamper-

ing a necessary and overdue examination of issues that continue to plague whatever remains of the Left." Indeed, she goes further and admits that "many of their [Kimball's and D'Souza's] observations contain more than a modicum of 'truth.'... they do, in many respects, illustrate the way in which the academic Left has isolated itself from the broader public sphere. Kimball's account of the 'cult of theory' among leftists is rather difficult to deny, as are D'Souza's charges of a burgeoning relativism" (p. 159). One can only wonder how such statements can be made to accord with those advanced in the first three chapters.

Scatamburlo provides here an informed account of postmodern theorizing and mounts her critique of it and her plea for a return to humanism, modernist epistemology and Marx. It is unclear if her position ultimately rests on a confidence in modern epistemology or if it is purely prudential, taking this position because the "net effect of years of 'arcane poststructuralist meta-criticism' has been the depoliticization of politics" (p. 163) and the demise of an organized left. In either event, it is ultimately in defense progressive politics and enlightened values that she mounts her critique of the postmodern Left and its rejection of universal values and cross-cultural humanism.

Importantly, Scatamburlo believes that the contemporary interest in identity politics has "often had the effect of replacing critical engagements with institutionalized structures of power with an individualist, introverted form of 'cathartic' or 'confessional' therapy" (p. 185). Furthermore, she finds that although lip-service is continually paid to the Holy Trinity of gender, race, and class, "precious little is said about class and the ways in which it intersects with dynamics such as race and gender" (p. 194). This oversight is particularly egregious, she contends, because it cedes the concerns and issues of the white working class to the right (p. 194). Succinctly put, for Scatamburlo, a successful Leftist analysis and pol-

itics can be accomplished only through a return to Marx (p. 197), and a renewed commitment to the values of socialism (p. 205), universalism, and humanism (p. 207).

Scatamburlo refuses, however, to defend a purely reactionary Marxism and, thus, appears to be caught in the final chapter between her desire to embrace the analyses of the older socialist left and that of the contemporary cultural left. Heartfelt appeals for unity and the necessity of each, however, do not erase the tensions that separate their foundational epistemologies. She is, thus, ultimately unsuccessful in her belated effort to rehabilitate the Marxist left.

In sum, Scatamburlo's tangential and irrelevant broadsides at the New Right in the first three chapters, although possibly important in demonstrating her progressive bonafides, proved to be time-consuming distractions from the philosophical (or political) work needed to make additional room on the left for Marx (and less for Nietzsche). In addition, Scatamburlo's commitment to universalism and eighteenth-century Enlightenment epistemology and her consequent inability to distance herself from its contemporary political instantiation, liberalism, greatly diminished the persuasiveness of this work. And finally, when one considers that much of this work is written with the most contested social, economic, and political issues taken for granted rather than argued, and in a dismissive tone inappropriate for scholarly discourse, one must question the persuasiveness of this work even for those committed to a progressive politics.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-pol>

Citation: Barry Alan Shain. Review of Scatamburlo, Valeri L. *Soldiers of Misfortune: The New Right's Culture War and the Politics of Political Correctness*. H-Pol, H-Net Reviews. December, 1998.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2540>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.