

These remarks about the politicization of university curricula, which were delivered at a Phi Beta Kappa forum on "hate speech" codes, appeared in Academic Questions, Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter 1992-93, and are reprinted here by permission. Dr. Morson is the Frances Hooper Professor of the Arts and Humanities and professor of Slavic languages at Northwestern University, Evanston, IL.

'Weeding In'

A Slavic Scholar Finds Political Correctness On Campus All Too (Chillingly) Familiar

By Gary Saul Morson

I am a specialist in Russian literature and culture. For me, as for most Slavists, current trends in the university concerning free speech and diversity of viewpoint evoke a strange sense of *déjà vu*, as they do not for our colleagues in English and comparative literature. We hear the argument that it is progressive to inject overt politicizing into the classroom and to hire faculty partly on the basis of their politics, because, as it is said, everything is always already political anyway; but we recall that this same argument was used in the Soviet Union and in Eastern Europe for decades. Its repetition evokes for us the mind-numbing sense of ennui, of overpowering conformity and dullness, that politicism, originally introduced with great moral fervor, produced there for so long. When we see those who object to politicism *per se*—people whose own politics may be liberal or radical—labeled covert racists or sexists, we recognize that such accusations may have significant impact on one's career and we recall the equivalent denunciations of East European intellectuals as "rootless cosmopolitans" or "enemies of the people." Having spent time in Eastern Europe, we know in our bones the mixture of fear, conformity, and boredom that was official intellectual life in the People's Republics.

For Americans, it often seems liberating to fight racism and classism through university research and teaching, and the newfound power of those convinced that they are overcoming oppression seems as humane as it is heady. The potential dangers, by contrast, appear remote. But for us Slavists, nothing seems more fragile than the atmosphere in which freewheeling dialogue can take place. Can racism not be overcome without impairing dialogic openness?

Our topic today, as I understand it, is the justifiability of the codes restricting free speech enacted at over 150 universities. One or two have been deemed unconstitutional by federal courts, but the reach of the courts extends only to public universities at best. When alumni, parents, or other outsiders express concern, it is usually said that these codes are simply meant to protect minority students from egregious Klan-like harassment, and who would object

to that? But in practice things work differently. For one thing, these codes are used by various minority groups against one another. For another, almost anything—for example, the belief that Shakespeare is an intrinsically great writer, the idea that professors should not make their political agenda part of the curriculum, or the mere mention of welfare dependency in a sociology class—easily qualifies today as racist or sexist. Since the codes are often maddeningly vague, it is, well, prudent to restrict one's speech as much as possible, especially if one does not have tenure or needs a research grant.

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Moreover, these codes are typically enforced by university courts, which operate by their own makeshift rules. The best preparation for a university hearing is a night spent reading Kafka. There is often no requirement allowing one to confront one's accuser, see evidence, or even appear to answer charges. University courts are usually run by people hired specifically to stamp out racism and sexism, which means the judges have a vested interest in showing that racism and sexism are rampant. What is more, it would take a brave person to defend, or appear as a witness, for someone facing such an accusation. One faces not just kangaroo courts but a whole marsupial justice system.

The content of these codes would qualify them as absurdist literature if they were not actually in force. The University of Connecticut forbids not only speech deemed offensive but also "inappropriately directed laughter." If one student tells an ethnic joke and another laughs at it, it would seem that *both* have violated the code. One can also violate the code by silence or, in the words of the code, "conspicuous exclusion of students from conversation." An official Smith College handout informs students that they can

be guilty of "heterosexism" not only if they say something derogatory about homosexuals but if they don't say anything at all: "This can take place by not acknowledging their existence." I can't help recalling from my Sovietology classes that a classic distinction between totalitarian regimes, like Nazi Germany or Stalinist Russia, and run-of-the-mill authoritarian ones is that authoritarian regimes forbid dissident speech, but totalitarian ones also compel orthodox speech. *One can't hide.*

Punishments, too, have a Transylvanian flavor. The author of a *New York* magazine article was impressed by one such incident: "When a student at the University of Michigan read a limerick that speculated jokingly about the homosexuality of a famous athlete, he was required to attend gay-sensitivity sessions and publish a piece of self-criticism in the student newspaper called 'Learned My Lesson'." We Slavists can't help recalling that *samo-kritika* — self-criticism — of just this sort was a staple of Stalinism: there is, for example, Sergei Eisenstein's exemplary piece of *samo-kritika*, "My Vicious and Worthless Film [*Ivan the Terrible*]."

Or penalties can be suggested secretly. One of the most widely publicized campus events of the past two years was the letter that Stanley Fish, a leading literary theorist, former chair of the Duke English department, and author of "There's No Such Thing as Free Speech and It's a Good Thing, Too," sent to the Duke provost and later publicly denied having written. Fish called on the provost to turn members of the fledgling Duke chapter of the National Association of Scholars — a chapter founded by the well-known liberal, civil libertarian, and Amnesty International activist James David Barber — into disenfranchised, second-class faculty members *en masse* by simple reason of membership. "In my view," Fish wrote, "member[s] of the National Association of Scholars should not be appointed to key university committees such as Appointments, Promotions, and Tenure, Distinguished Professor, or any other dealing with academic priorities and evaluations." What would we say if it was suggested that members of the Marxist Literary Group of the Modern Language Association should not be on promotions committees?

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As this last example illustrates, codes restricting free speech cannot be taken in isolation. They are not just dangerous in themselves but symptomatic of a larger problem in universities, especially in humanities departments. An oppressive atmosphere of conformity

exists, which makes the expression of diverse views, outside the gamut of those held to be politically *or theoretically* acceptable, dangerous. Few will risk it, and I receive many letters and phone calls from young scholars who spend their time and energy keeping their mouths shut but who need occasionally to verbalize their feelings to someone. One young scholar from the Soviet Union, who made the mistake of suggesting that the literature faculty invite a well-known critic of certain currently fashionable approaches to give a lecture, described the "friendly advice" she received: her contract was up for renewal and, really, she should not make such suggestions. Her comment *to me* was: "For this I left Russia?"

One does not have to agree with the political or theoretical positions of the National Association of Scholars or others critical of current academic trends to recognize that there is very definitely a "chilling effect" on free speech that extends far beyond speech codes.

One might consider the phenomenon of loyalty oaths, which are now being instituted on campus and in professional organizations. In November 1990, the *New York Times* described the controversy that erupted at Clark University when a philosophy professor refused to fill out and sign, as she was required to, a form describing how a new course "explored and integrated" views promoting cultural diversity. Indeed, Barbara Bergmann, the president of the American Association of University Professors — an organization that supposedly exists to defend academic freedom — recently wrote a letter published in the *Newsletter of the Committee on the Status of Women in the Economics Profession* in which she urged that candidates for office in the national American Economics Association [AEA] be asked to fill out a questionnaire (with results to be distributed to association members) including questions on "the candidate's activism on behalf of women in the candidate's department, their memberships in feminist and antifeminist organizations, their activities on behalf of women [in AEA], and *whether they have made a public commitment to feminism*" (italics added).

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I have tried the following experiment. As I lecture around the country, I ask friends who teach English or comparative literature at major universities

whether they know anyone, roughly my age (forty-four) or younger, who publicly calls himself a Republican. I have never found anyone who *knew* one such person. My next question is, do you really think there are none? And they answer, well, no, there would have to be one or two. Then why do you think they don't say so? I ask.

At Hampshire College, a special faculty committee ruled that an assistant professor's contract should not be renewed because of his "failure to mount a 'Third World challenge' to 'the canon.'" That is, his fault was silence: NOT expressing approved views. Imagine if he had actually expressed disapproved views, and defended the canon!

The fact is that by now it is not all that easy to hire many conservatives, or even many opposed to politicization, in any case. That is because such people recognize long before they get their Ph.D. that the university is not hospitable to them and pick a less intellectually conformist occupation, like accounting. Literary studies is much more hospitable to people who want to become clones of the latest orthodoxy. You've heard of weeding *out*; I call the current process "weeding *in*."

A university should be a place where it is possible to explore all sorts of positions, entertain views one does not hold, try out new ideas before knowing where they will lead, experiment, innovate, *play*. But the current situation, symbolized by but not limited to anti-free speech codes, makes that all but impossible.

I know that Catharine Stimpson and other powerful figures in the Modern Language Association and elsewhere will deny that there is any restriction on expression of unorthodox views or any chilling effect on free speech. But just as it would have been unwise to ask George Wallace or Bull Connors whether blacks in the South were oppressed, so one does not question MLA presidents and those who agree with their views to find out if the unorthodox on campus feel free to speak and play with ideas.

I believe that many of my colleagues who deny there is any chilling effect on free speech are quite sincere: they do not experience it. And they witness heated controversies that take place within the gamut of acceptable views. They are correct in denouncing certain critics of the university who describe a solid monolith of views. Literary theorists, for example, are always arguing with each other. Nevertheless, the penalties for trying to enlarge the range of acceptability are palpable and severe. For those outside that range, or even for those within it who like to explore ideas by trying out different positions and playing devil's advocate, the current situation is much more restrictive than it was when I first entered the university.

It is now routine to denounce those who make the points I have just made as racist or sexist. The very

use of terms like "politically correct," it is said, is meant to restore us to the former racist rule of white males. Such views are pernicious and reactionary, and reactionaries, of course, cannot be tolerated. The logic is Orwellian. It reminds me of the handful of Russian dissidents in the 1960s who were *arrested* for saying that there was no freedom of speech in their country. Why it is impossible to believe both in real equality and in freewheeling debate is something that I do not understand. Perhaps my experiences as a scholar of Russian culture, which has only recently rediscovered the value of dialogue, has blinded me to something that my colleagues in English and comparative literature seem to see so readily.

I hope that when the political climate shifts, it will move toward real tolerance and not to the suppression of the current suppressor. But historical experience makes me fear that recently developed weapons may someday be redirected in an ever-expanding compass of hostile restrictions.

It seems to me that a university ought to cherish, not suppress, intellectual exploration, views that are "counter, original, spare, strange," to use Gerard Manley Hopkins's phrase. Isn't the encouragement of diverse ideas, of fearless argumentation and experimentation, and of real intellectual nonconformity what universities are all about? ■