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Paulo Freire and political correctness

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Abstract

This paper addresses the issue of political correctness from a Freirean point of view. An identification of the range of areas to which the label 'political correctness' has been applied reveals a confusingly multifaceted term. The author concentrates on the key characteristics of intolerance, conformity, the impeding of questioning and criticism, the stifling of debate, and the denial of alternatives. Thus defined, 'political correctness' has no place in Freirean education.

This paper argues that Paulo Freire would oppose educational policies and practices based on politically-correct assumptions. Given his espousal of conscientisation and critical literacy, political correctness is in tension with everything Freire stands for. To be a 'politically correct Freirean', then, would be a contradiction in terms. The difficulty in asserting this, however, arises when one attempts to define 'political correctness'. For, despite its widespread use and application in diverse contexts, the term remains remarkably ambiguous (O'Keefe 1992, pp. 123-6). This imprecision is significant for two reasons. First, it has allowed the label 'political correctness' to become a multi-purpose bludgeon for criticising an enormous variety of new developments in education and other spheres of the social world (Dickstein 1993, p. 542). Second, such ambiguity obscures the potential value of the term as a distinct concept in educational discourse. My analysis suggests that if the concept of political correctness is to have educational force, its pejorative connotation must be retained. Once conditions for its use have been clarified, useful comparisons can be drawn between political correctness, dogmatism and

pedagogical authoritarianism. The contrasts between politically-correct approaches and the Freirean ideals of critical consciousness and critical literacy likewise become readily apparent.

The many faces of 'political correctness'

'Political correctness' has been one of the most hotly contested topics of the present decade. Following earlier battles in the USA over the nature and purpose of higher education—generated in the first instance by the publication of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* (1988), and later fuelled by other conservative works such as Roger Kimball's *Tenured Radicals* (1991) and Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* (1991)—charges of political correctness in the academy have become the subject of considerable scholarly and popular debate. 'Political correctness' has served as a referent for an extraordinary range of different policies, attitudes and events. In the educational sphere alone, the term has been used in relation to: the encroachment of politics into university classrooms (education, it is charged, has 'become political'); 'multiculturalism'; new academic programs such as 'women's studies' and 'black studies'; Marxist, feminist, deconstructionist, postmodernist, and other critical approaches to particular fields of study (especially literary criticism); moves to reform language use—particularly, though not exclusively, to make it 'non-sexist'; affirmative action policies (e.g. in criteria for admission to universities, in the appointment of faculty, in promotions, in scholarships, etc.); alleged favouritism of other kinds towards women and ethnic minorities; the apparent abandonment of merit as the prime criterion for judging quality; speech codes (where offensive remarks about particular groups of people are banned); and 'sensitivity' programs for incoming students and staff.

The lack of conceptual clarification in discourses on 'political correctness' has allowed the term to serve as a powerful device for attacking new ideas and practices. The aggressiveness of the assault reflects, in part, a change in the perceptions of those employing the label over time. Roger Kimball, a prominent conservative commentator in the 'culture wars', argues that political correctness has shifted from being something that was merely farcical to a phenomenon that is genuinely tragic. He asserts that while in the past the label 'politically correct' described:

... the self-righteous, non-smoking, ecologically sensitive, vegetarian, feminist, non-racist, sandal-wearing beneficiaries of capitalism—faculty as well as students—who paraded their outworn sixties-radicalism in the classroom and in their social life

in more recent times the situation has become far more serious:

... [A]nyone who has taken the trouble to observe what has happened in the academy knows that over the last couple of years political correctness has evolved from a sporadic expression of left-leaning self-righteousness into a dogma of orthodoxy that is widely accepted, and widely enforced, by America's cultural elite.

(Kimball 1993, p. 565)

For some critics, 'political correctness' appears to encompass almost every political position, academic development (i.e. new course, programme, etc.), or theoretical perspective which does not comfortably mesh with a conservative view of the world. Take, for instance, the following statement by William Phillips (1993):

What is political correctness? It is a loose but useful term, denoting a wide movement with many facets and differences, but essentially a new left configuration. It includes extreme and radical feminist theories, gay and lesbian liberation studies and activities, ideas stemming from the deconstructionists, neo-Marxists, and remnants of old, revolutionary postures. It is not basically Marxist or revolutionary, but it is to a large extent anti-American, in some quarters anti-capitalist, pro-third world, pro-minority, and anti-Western cultural and political interests.

(1993, p. 671):

The same approach is evident in Jerry Martin's (1993) critique of what he calls the 'transformationist view' of education. Martin collapses deconstruction, Marxism, feminism, the work of critical pedagogues such as Giroux and McLaren, and a range of other critical perspectives into a single homogeneous category: 'the postmodern argument for the transformationist view'. According to Martin (1993):

... the postmodern argument for making the university an agent of social transformation protects itself from criticism, not only theoretically, but institutionally as well. The early steps of the postmodern argument may be questionable, but only grant them, and the remaining steps—including political correctness, critical pedagogy, speech codes, and denial—follow.

(1993, p. 653)

We might object to characterisations of this kind in several different ways. On one level we might protest that this form of reductionism demonstrates an ignorance of the complexities of the traditions in question, and renders

invisible the conflicts and contradictions within and between different pedagogical approaches. Or, doubt might be cast on the appropriateness of the label 'postmodern' in Martin's article: some of the principles alluded to as typical of the 'postmodern view'—elements of Marxism, for instance—are among the key ideas postmodernists seek to position themselves *against*. Alternatively, specific mention could be made of gross inaccuracies in Martin's portrayal of critical pedagogy. He asserts, for example, that '[o]ne of the main tasks of critical pedagogy is to overcome "patterns of resistance" from students who resist ideas that challenge prevailing norms' (1993, p. 643). Similarly, confusing the exercising of academic authority with political authoritarianism, Martin claims:

The transformationist proposes to mould students into, among other things, radical egalitarians; but to do so would give teachers authority over students that is incompatible with radical egalitarianism. The dictatorship of the proletariat may have been replaced by the dictatorship of the professoriate, but the dilemma remains the same—how to achieve anti-authoritarian ends by authoritarian means.

(1993, p. 652)

Distortions of this magnitude are not uncommon when complex political positions, intellectual traditions, and pedagogical theories are lumped together as part of a common 'disease': the scourge of political correctness in the academy. Wielding the label 'political correctness' as a multi-purpose weapon can, as many who have been on the receiving end of the attacks might attest, be highly effective in silencing debate and squashing resistance (cf. Carey 1992, pp. 58–9). If the debates over political correctness are conceived as a war between two broad factions—the conservative Right and a 'rainbow coalition' of groups on the Left—then the former can be seen as having achieved a major victory in at least one sense: with such a multifaceted concept, almost any development incompatible with conservative ideas can be criticised. An obvious contradiction surfaces here: using a term to roundly dismiss a diverse array of opposing perspectives is more consistent with *promoting* political correctness (as defined below) than resisting it. Of course, where the goal is ideological and material domination, conceptual contradictions and confusions do not necessarily matter. If the meaning of 'political correctness' is sufficiently vague, but the connotations of being labelled 'politically correct' clearly and invariably negative, care in using the term is no longer necessary: the *accusation* of political correctness becomes, on its own, sufficient to cause the desired effect.

This process has, according to some commentators, been far from accidental. Messer-Davidow (1993) argues that the Right has played a significant role in both initiating the attacks and creating an aura of suspicion

around present moves to reform the curriculum in universities. This does not mean that the *ambiguities* that attend many references to political correctness are the result of a carefully crafted plan by conservatives; indeed, these confusions are seldom noticed and only infrequently analysed by those on the Right (see Dickstein 1993). Of one point, though, we can be certain: the ferocity and breadth of the assault has given 'political correctness' an unquestionably pejorative connotation, and this has been used to good effect by defenders of tradition in universities and other institutions. Reformists, whether avowedly leftwing or not, have often ended up on the back foot—defensive, and, at times, apparently stunned by the force of the onslaught.

Given this situation, it becomes especially important to clarify conditions for the term's use if 'political correctness' is to remain a pejorative concept. In this paper, I want to concentrate on one of the few points on which agreement can be found among many critics from both the Right and the Left: namely, that political correctness has something to do with *intolerance*. I begin from the assumption that a worthwhile connection can be made between political correctness and what Lehman (1993, p. 598) describes as 'the inability or unwillingness to tolerate a rival point of view'. (On the theme of intolerance, and related notions such as conformism, compare, Delbanco 1993; Louny 1993; Marcus 1993; Merkin 1993; Phillips 1994; Hall 1994.) The concept of political correctness advanced below focuses on orthodoxy, conformism, intolerance of differences, and the suppression of questioning. Political correctness, when seen in this light, might relate to the enforcement of a 'party line', the refusal to allow or acknowledge alternative or opposing views on political and ethical matters, the censuring of criticism, the banning of questions, or the stifling of debate. Political correctness, in sum, is the enforcement of one position as the only possible or acceptable or legitimate position.

In emphasising intolerance, conformity, and the suppression of criticism and questioning as key criteria, I am attempting (i) to capture a key element in the existing discourse on political correctness, and (ii) to develop a construct which might be meaningfully related to the work of Paulo Freire. My suggestion is that if political correctness is to have any distinctive significance in a theory of education based on Freirean principles, it must remain a pejorative concept. It is important to acknowledge, however, that not all commentators see it this way. Some, in defending recent changes to curricula and policy, say that if the term 'political correctness' is to be used at all, it should correspond to positive developments. Jardine (1994, p. 106), for example, submits that '[i]nsofar as it is a term which means anything, [political correctness] ... describes the teacher's commitment to making all teaching inclusive, faced with an increasingly diverse undergraduate population'. Others deny that political correctness exists at all: it is, they argue, simply a malicious fabrication by the Right.

As far as the first option is concerned, I believe that if 'political correctness' is to name a positive set of attitudes or practices, the ambiguities currently associated with the term can only increase. In asserting this, I am presupposing that the aim is to find something meaningful to say about political correctness *in relation to Freire's work*. If this is the case, a pejorative reading is more effective than a positive interpretation of the term. While it is true that the label 'political correctness' has been used as a referent for developments Freire would support—e.g. certain multicultural policies, the growth of women's studies programs, the discussion of literary works from Marxist and feminist points of view, etc.—it is not the case that Freire would endorse *all* practices associated with these developments. It could be argued that the criteria for distinguishing practices which Freire would support from those which he would not, should spring from the ethical and educational imperatives in Freire's work. Hence, being politically correct may mean being critical, dialogical, rigorous, and so on. But what would give the term 'political correctness' *special* significance if this was the case? Distinct concepts for describing these characteristics are already in place in Freire's work: the Freirean ethical ideal is encapsulated in the notion of 'humanization'; 'liberating education' is the generic term for a family of pedagogical principles, practices and attitudes consistent with this ideal; and 'critical literacy' captures the essence of Freire's approach to literacy. It is not at all clear what 'political correctness' would name that is not already covered by these concepts.

If the term is given a pejorative reading, however, 'political correctness' might usefully be employed to describe a series of related practices for which there is currently no generic concept in Freire's work. Freire talks about dogmatism, sectarianism, intolerance of differences, the confining of investigation within overly-restrictive boundaries, the silencing of questions, enforced conformity, and the denial of dialogue, but he does not have an overarching concept for collectively naming these practices. A staunch member of a political party (whether on the Right or the Left) may hold to a position slavishly in the face of criticism: this is dogmatism; or, teachers may actively impede discussion and debate in a monologue on political ideas: such a stance is anti-dialogical; or, political leaders may refuse to allow consideration of opposing views: this is intolerance. The notion of 'political correctness' allows all of these (undesirable) practices to be described under a single heading.

Education, conscientisation and critical literacy

Freire's work is well-known in educational circles. Rather than rehearsing ground covered elsewhere, I shall limit the focus here to a few basic principles of particular significance for the discussion that follows. Freire (1972a) argues that all human beings have an ontological and historical vocation of humanisation. People pursue this vocation when they engage in critical, dialogical praxis. Praxis, for Freire, represents the synthesis of reflection and action. Where opportunities for pursuing authentic praxis are impeded, a situation of oppression emerges. Impediments to praxis may take the form of overt constraints to human action (e.g. exploitative working conditions), structural barriers to democratic participation in social life (e.g. being denied the vote because of one's illiteracy), or hegemonic control of patterns of thought (e.g. fostering the view that poverty is 'God's will'). Relations of oppression are dehumanising for both the oppressors and the oppressed. The oppressed pursue their liberation (and hence humanisation) when they struggle against the conditions which oppress them, seeking, collectively, to reclaim their role as subjects in the historical process.

Education is vital in this process. Freire calls upon educators to side with the oppressed in building a better social world (Weiler 1991). Education, on the Freirean view, should be based on a structured, purposeful and rigorous form of dialogue between the teacher and students, and between the students themselves, rather than a monological, one-way, vertical relationship where the teacher issues communiques to passive, docile, patiently listening pupils (Freire 1972a, ch.2; 1976, pp. 45–6; Roberts 1996a). Through education, participants undergo 'conscientization', attaining a (more) critical awareness of social reality generally and the nature of oppression in particular. Conscientisation implies the movement from 'magical' or 'naive' levels to understanding toward critical consciousness (Freire 1972b; 1976, pp. 17–20). In *Education: The Practice of Freedom*, Freire suggests that critical consciousness is characterised by:

... depth in the interpretation of problems; by the substitution of causal principles for magical explanations; by the testing of one's 'findings' and by openness to revision; by the attempt to avoid distortion when perceiving problems and to avoid preconceived notions when analysing them; by refusing to transfer responsibility; by rejecting passive positions; by soundness of argumentation; by the practice of dialogue rather than polemics; by receptivity to the new for reasons beyond mere novelty and by the good sense not to reject the old just because it is old—by accepting what is valid in both old and new.

(1976, p. 18)

These ideas are extended in later writings, where Freire speaks of the importance of adopting an investigative, probing stance in the act of studying, reading and thinking (Freire 1985, pp. 1–4; Freire & Shor 1987, pp. 10–11, 82–7; Horton & Freire 1990, pp. 23–7). Readers, he stresses, should never simply accept the ideas presented in books; rather, they should always be prepared to question what they read, and, in turn, to be challenged by authors and by other readers (see Roberts 1993, pp. 172–3). Freirean critical literacy is distinguished by the linking of 'word' with 'world', the relating of theory to practice, the overcoming of pedagogical and political passivity, the rejection of fragmented and decontextualised readings of an author's work, and the reinterpretation of personal experience, among other features (Peters & Lankshear 1996; Aronowitz 1993; Freire & Macedo 1995; Roberts 1996b). Freire sees the process of critically reading both 'texts' and 'contexts' as necessarily incomplete. In so far as the world is constantly changing, we can never *know* absolutely or completely (Horton & Freire 1990, p. 101), but instead must be ever restless—perpetually curious—in our quest to uncover deeper and deeper layers of meaning in social phenomena and problems. Becoming critically conscious demands a deliberate effort to probe beneath the surface: to seek out 'the *raison d'être* which explains the object [of study]' (Freire & Shor 1987, p. 82). Through this process of engaging word and world, human beings 'create' history, and, in so doing, 'recreate' themselves.

To judge by both his theory and his practice, it seems certain that Freire would be fundamentally opposed to any policy or practice which compelled or coerced people to accept a position without question. (A 'position' may be an interpretation of a text, a stance on a contentious issue, or a reading of social reality.) To abandon the right to question is to forsake the very essence of the Freirean educational ideal: the development of a critical approach toward understanding the world (see Roberts 1996c). 'Political correctness', I maintain, can be seen as the exact opposite of critical consciousness, and, hence, as incompatible with any program of education based on the principle of conscientisation. I want now to elaborate on this argument, drawing in particular on Freire's later writings.

Freire on tolerance, dogmatism and diversity

While Freire has always been clearly (and openly) to the left end of the political spectrum (see, for example, Freire's comments in Freire & Faundez 1989, p. 49; Horton & Freire 1990, p. 219), he has frequently criticised intolerance on the part of both the Left and the Right. In reflecting recently on the politics of life in Chile three decades ago, for example, Freire states:

[O]nly a radical politics—not a sectarian one, however, but one that seeks a unity in diversity among progressive forces—could ever have won the battle for a democracy that could stand up to the power and virulence of the Right. Instead, there was only sectarianism and intolerance—the rejection of differences. Tolerance was not what it ought to be: the revolutionary virtue that consists in a peaceful coexistence with those who are different, in order to wage a better fight against the adversaries.

(Freire 1994, p. 39)

Dogmatic stances, like reactionary responses, deny the reflective, critical component of humanising praxis; neither position can be conscientising. Indeed, dogmatic and reactionary positions both positively *impede* the development of critical thought and action; both constrain, rather than enhance, opportunities for expanding the discursive universe within which people might participate. For Freire, there are important similarities, as well as certain differences, between the dogmatist and the reactionary. The dogmatist holds steadfastly and unreflexively to a particular view of the world. He or she either refuses to acknowledge the existence of alternative perspectives, staying with a particular 'line' on a given issue no matter what, or denounces counter positions without engaging them. The dogmatist may, like the reactionary, be defensive in the face of criticism, attacking opposing ideas with vigour or even violence; or, he or she may simply ignore criticism and hold resolutely to existing views. For the reactionary, opposing positions represent a threat; for the dogmatist, they may simply be considered irrelevant. For dogmatists, there is only one way to view the world, *period*; for reactionaries, there is only one *acceptable or legitimate* way to view the world.

For Freire, dogmatic and reactionary stances are both closely related to authoritarianism. Dogmatic and reactionary educators wish to impose their view of the world on students, stifling criticism and discouraging (or explicitly prohibiting) questioning. If there is only one correct, acceptable or legitimate way of understanding an issue or subject or object of study, and if one's task is to teach others about this object of study, then it follows that this must be the view conveyed to students. The dogmatic teacher *knows* (or thinks he or she knows) what others need to know; thus, the ideas students bring to the educative situation are neither relevant nor valued. This, Freire says, 'is the certitude, always, of the authoritarian, the dogmatist, who knows what the popular classes know, and knows what they need even without talking to them'. Freire continues:

What makes sense to them is what comes from their readings, and what they write in their books and articles. It is what they already know about the knowledge that seems basic and indispensable to them, and which, in the form of content, must be 'deposited' in the 'empty consciousness' of the popular classes.

(Freire 1994, p. 116)

These points lead usefully to a consideration of intolerance, conformity, and the suppression of criticism—and their opposites (tolerance, difference, and criticalness)—as pivotal themes in a Freirean theory of political correctness. In recent publications, Freire has emphasised the value of tolerance as a key virtue in the university (see especially Escobar et al. 1994). He speaks of the need to accept—though not uncritically—ways of thinking other than one's own. In *Learning to Question*, Freire notes:

Tolerance doesn't in any way imply giving up what seems to you to be right and just and good. No, tolerant people do not give up their dreams: they are determined to fight for them. But they do respect those who have a different dream from themselves.

(Freire & Faundez 1989, p. 17)

Tolerance, for Freire, does *not* mean accepting all views without question; to the contrary, respect for others positively demands that their ideas be open for discussion and debate. Tolerance makes ethical and educational sense to Freire precisely to the extent that it enables one to *engage* views other than one's own. Teachers have a right—indeed, a responsibility—to challenge the students' perceptions of the world. But, Freire (1994) says,

... [w]hat is not permissible to be doing is to conceal truths, deny information, impose principles, eviscerate the educands of their freedom, or punish them, no matter by what method, if, for various reasons, they fail to accept my discourse—reject my utopia.

(1994, p. 83)

In his recently published dialogue with a group of Mexican professors, Freire argues that the university ought not to become a homogeneous institution where all students have, or are encouraged to adopt, the same views and commitments. Freire sees difference within a university as potentially enriching, provided it is 'lived with faith, loyalty, honesty, and integrity'. He suggests:

Instead of engaging in controversy about the difference, we must hold a dialogue about the difference. For it is very important that the young student perceives a different vision of reality and that this reality is not the same for all university students. In this manner, the young student will know that there is a diverse educational context within the university. Thus, his or her political and ideological education will be ensured.

(Freire in Escobar et al. 1994, p. 91)

The university, Freire argues, ought not to become a kind of 'sacred temple where to be chaste is a virtue'. An institution of higher education 'that is beyond and above the social and political system of the society where it exists is unfeasible' (Escobar et al. 1994, 79, p. 136). The university should be, and cannot avoid being, a thoroughly political institution, but this does not mean that it should prescribe or proscribe political positions for students. Freire supports an environment of intellectual pluralism within institutions of higher education, where students might, for example, be taught by both reactionary and revolutionary professors. The key is for all teachers to be open with students about their politics:

I belong to a political party in Brazil and the students know this; there is no reason to hide it. What I cannot do is change the academic policy of the university where I work for the policy of the Worker's Party and I must respect the students who do not have anything to do with that party.

(Freire in Escobar et al. 1994, p. 138)

These points find further elaboration in *Pedagogy of Hope*, where Freire speaks of the impossibility of educating without 'running risks'. It is, Freire argues, 'precisely the political nature of educational practice, its helplessness to be "neutral", that requires of the educator his or her ethicalness' (Freire 1994, p. 77). Freire continues:

What especially moves me to be ethical is to know that, inasmuch as education of its very nature is directive and political, I must, without ever denying my dream or my utopia before the educands, respect them. To defend a thesis, a position, a preference, with earnestness, defend it rigorously, but passionately, as well, and at the same time to stimulate the contrary discourse, and respect the right to utter that discourse, is the best way to teach, first, the right to have our own ideas, even our duty to 'quarrel' for them, for our dreams—and not only to learn the syntax of the verb, *haver*; and second, mutual respect.

(Freire 1994, p. 78)

On the one hand, then, university teachers ought not to disavow their personal politics: to do so would be to deny the situatedness of their pedagogy within a particular conception of human beings and the social world. On the other hand, academics also ought not to take advantage of the spaces the university provides to engage in party politics, to coerce students into accepting certain policies, to punish those who do not conform to one's own view of the world, and so on. A university teacher should be secure enough in his or her own convictions to leave their ideas open to refutation—by others, or by subsequent events. Taking a stance on ethical and political issues always involves risks and uncertainties. Paradoxically, greater certainty about the worth of a particular stance can, from Freire's point of view, only emerge through not being too certain of one's own position, and through continually exposing it to counter-positions. Working in a pluralistic way with others is not easy, since 'pluralism within the university entails positions that are not only different but antagonistic' (Escobar et al. 1994, pp. 151–2), but it is the only way forward if the university is to become a site for genuine tolerance, critical analysis, dialogue, and debate.

Some implications of a Freirean view on political correctness

Given the ideas presented above, what might be said about the various domains to which the term 'political correctness' has been applied? Some of the implications of a Freirean view on political correctness are clear. With regard to debates over core curricula and the teaching of the canon, for instance, on the criteria outlined earlier, any situations where students are prevented, or discouraged, from criticising or questioning an author's ideas or the teacher's interpretation of texts can obviously be classed as examples of political correctness. Such cases overtly contradict the Freirean ideal of critical consciousness. Similarly, if certain books are categorically banned in a university context on the grounds that they do not 'fit' the lecturer's personal political perspective, a charge of political correctness would be valid. The same would be true of cases where sections of texts are ignored, removed, or censored because the lecturer finds them 'offensive' (sexist, racist, homophobic, colonialist, etc.). An indictment of 'political correctness' would be ill-founded if university teachers merely attempted to incorporate feminist or Marxist perspectives (or various conservative and liberal views) into the curriculum; indeed, if these approaches represent major alternatives in addressing enduring questions, themes and concerns, those who intentionally keep such perspectives *out* of core courses are acting in a politically correct way (cf. Roberts 1995).

A crucial element in conservative assaults on reforms to university curricula is the charge that education has become 'political' and is now 'ideologically driven' (see, for example, Alter 1993; Sidorsky 1993). This accusation, Freire would argue, betrays either a naive understanding of the political dimensions to education or a mischievous attempt to disguise the politics of traditional pedagogical practices. Freire, along with dozens of scholars in critical pedagogy and the sociology of education (e.g. Apple 1979, 1985; Giroux 1983, 1988; Aronowitz & Giroux 1986; McLaren, 1989), has convincingly demonstrated that teaching is *always* a political process. Educational programs always favour some values, beliefs, attitudes, practices, ideologies, and interests over others. This is not the same thing as saying that teachers cannot avoid being politically *correct*. Freire would argue that it is not a matter of asking whether one ought or ought not to be political as a teacher, but rather of deciding what *kind* of politics to foster in the classroom (cf. Freire 1987). An openly 'political' teacher admits his or her political preferences, but allows these to be questioned, challenged and debated; a 'politically-correct' teacher advances one way of thinking as the *only* (acceptable or legitimate) way. The former encourages tolerance and diversity; the latter impedes the development of these qualities. Recognising and acknowledging the political character of education expands the students' discursive universe by allowing them to interpret policies and practices in a new way; political correctness more tightly wraps student views within existing enclosures. All teachers take certain assumptions about human beings and the world as (at least provisionally) given for particular purposes in the classroom; politically-correct teachers take it for granted that their assumptions ought to prevail for all, no matter what the circumstances. If 'political correctness' is equivalent to 'bringing politics into the classroom', then *all* education is politically correct from a Freirean point of view. Freire would be neither in favour of nor against 'political correctness', since the term, if defined in this manner, would fail to give effective purchase—whether pejorative or positive—on anything: a 'politically-correct' educator would simply be an educator.

The equating or linking of 'political correctness' with 'multiculturalism' is a peculiar and, at times revealing, phenomenon. The conjoining of the two is almost exclusively a trait of conservative critiques of political correctness (see, for instance, Berger 1993; Brustein 1993; Phillips 1993; Radosh 1993). Where liberals or radicals mention the two in the same breath, it is invariably to defend allegedly politically-correct practices or attitudes as a means toward a noble end: multiculturalism. Of the conservative accounts, perhaps the most blatant declaration of opposition to multiculturalism came from Hilton Kramer (1993, p. 571), who called it the 'bastard offspring' of the political correctness movement. Others, however, have also been surprisingly forthright. Brigitte Berger (1993, p. 517) claims that 'the multicultural agenda is overwhelmingly a political agenda and has very little to do with the essential

tasks and mission of a modern university'. Signalling the immanent arrival of an academic Armageddon, she writes:

A university wavering between the mindless visions of multiculturalist propagandists and the complacency of an intellectually slothful professoriate is about to abandon its *raison d'être* and civilatory mission. Rather than witnessing 'the end of history' as Francis Fukuyama argued a few years ago, today we must face up to the prospect of the end of a civilization.

(Berger 1993, p. 526)

William Phillips offers an equally alarmist account. Beginning with the premise that '[m]ulticulturalism is the battle cry of the politically correct and those under its [sic] influence', he claims that reformists are 'promoting a largely inflated African heritage for blacks as a source for the knowledge and science of the West'. Were such groups to succeed in realising their goals, Phillips maintains, 'Western culture would be wiped out, or at least demoted to the status of an evil past' (Phillips 1993, p. 672).

Freire, needless to say, sees the issue of multiculturalism quite differently. He has always viewed racism as deeply dehumanising, and has long campaigned for better recognition of non-dominant cultural groups in educational institutions. In *Pedagogy of Hope*, Freire argues for a position of 'unity in diversity' as a means for addressing the problems confronting various minority groups. Without this, he says, 'the so-called minorities could not even struggle, in the United States, for the most basic ... rights, let alone overcome barriers that keep them from "being themselves", from being "minorities for themselves", with one another and not against one another' (Freire 1994, p. 151). Pointing out that minorities often collectively make up the majority, Freire maintains that only through concentrating on their similarities as well as their differences can the different groups build a 'substantial, radical democracy'. Freire believes that the oppression of ethnic minorities (and women) cannot be understood in the absence of a class analysis: any solution to problems of racism and sexism must therefore also address the question of class struggle.

Freire contends that in a multicultural society there is a need for a certain kind of tension between different cultures. This is a tension 'to which the various cultures expose themselves by being different, in a democratic relationship in which they strive for advancement ... [It] is the tension of not begin able to escape their self-construction, their self-creation, their self-production' (Freire 1994, p. 156). Cultural pluralism or 'multiculturality' (these terms are synonymous for Freire) is an ongoing project: a continuous, unfinished process of social, dialogical struggle. Freire summarises his position thus:

The very quest for this oneness in difference [through unity in diversity], the struggle for it as a process, in and of itself is the beginning of a creation of multiculturalism. Let me emphasize once more: multiculturalism as a phenomenon involving the coexistence of different cultures in one and the same space is not something natural and spontaneous. It is a historical creation, involving decision, political determination, mobilization, and organization, on the part of each cultural group, in view of common purposes. Thus, it calls for a certain educational practice, one that will be consistent with these objectives. It calls for a new ethics, founded on respect for differences.

(Freire 1994, p. 157)

Freire's acknowledgment of difference does not lead him to the view that one should never criticise cultures other than one's own. In *We Make the Road by Walking*, he notes:

My respect for the soul of the culture does not prevent me from trying, with the people, to change some conditions that appear to me as obviously against the beauty of being human.

Using as an example the tradition in Latin American cultures which prevents men from cooking, Freire observes:

In the last analysis, men created the tradition and the assumption in the heads of the women that if men cook, they give the impression that they are no longer male.

(Horton & Freire 1990, p. 131).

This confers an advantage on men, and places an additional burden on women who have to work in both the field and the home. Freire argues that his respect for this tradition should not prevent him, as an educator, from challenging this practice and the assumptions on which it is based (for two sides to this issue, see Bowers 1983; and Roberts 1996d). Pointing out that such traditions are historical and cultural formations (rather than given destinies), Freire maintains that 'if it can be changed, it's not unethical to put the possibility of change on the table' (Horton & Freire 1990, p. 132).

Freire would not, of course, support every educational development initiated in the name of multiculturalism. His approach would be to examine each educative situation in its context, and in the light of a clear set of ethical principles (Roberts 1996e). Freire's discussion in *Pedagogy of Hope* makes it plain that, for him, issues of ethnicity (and gender, and homosexuality, and poverty) should be *debated* in a climate of open discussion, uninhibited by the paternalism of guilt (Freire 1994, p. 152). He recalls the wrath he endured from

a young black leader for advocating 'unity in diversity' at a seminar in Chicago, and also notes resistance from friends and colleagues to the notion that problems of ethnicity and class are related (Freire 1994, pp. 153–9). From a Freirean standpoint, multiculturalism would certainly *not* be 'equivalent to', or 'a symptom of', or 'a dimension of', or (to use Kramer's shocking phrase) the 'bastard offspring' of, political correctness. However, given Freire's commitment to 'multiculturality' as one aspect of his wider ethical ideal, it becomes all the more important that struggles toward this end be subjected to the same standards of critical examination as all other educational endeavours.

If educationists are concerned with practising, promoting or enhancing Freirean critical literacy, it seems to me that they must—on ethical and educational grounds—be opposed to political correctness. In fact, the identification and analysis of, and resistance to, politically-correct policies and practices might itself be an example of critically literate activity. The critical interrogation of popular media stories from a Freirean point of view would allow genuine examples of intolerance and the suppression of criticism to be distinguished from those where the allegation of 'political correctness' is itself used as a silencing device. If it is true that many accounts of political correctness rest on vague conceptual criteria, poorly-developed arguments, and contradictory assumptions, then the Freirean notion of critical literacy has much to offer in exposing such flaws. These tasks are important at the present time, for inasmuch as politically-correct practices are perceived as overwhelmingly undesirable, there is a strong possibility that those accused of such activities will suffer considerable personal stress, if not outright humiliation. Equally, those who dare to challenge prevailing orthodoxy in environments where political correctness is fostered and enforced deserve the support of colleagues who are also willing to rub against the grain of conformity. The price to be paid for speaking out in such cases is sometimes high indeed, but, as Freire has often said, risks are an inevitable part of the educational process.

Conclusion

The parameters for a Freirean perspective on political correctness should now be clear. Freire regards tolerance, difference, debate, and questioning as fundamental principles on which any university should be founded. Politically-correct policies, practices and attitudes are those which either negate or impede these principles. 'Political correctness', as it has been defined in this paper, relates to the promotion, whether this is direct or indirect, of one position as the only acceptable, legitimate, or possible one. From a Freirean perspective, teachers have a responsibility not only to tolerate views which

oppose their own, but actively to stimulate engagement with alternative discourses. To confine discussion within overly-narrow boundaries, in the full knowledge that alternative perspectives exist, and where opportunities for considering a wider range of positions are readily available, is thus as politically correct as banning questions or actively ruling out dissenting views. Hence, intolerance, which lies at the heart of political correctness, does not just consist in the refusal to *allow* opposition, questioning and debate, but also in the failure to provide the conditions that make these critical processes possible. Political correctness, as discussed above, inhibits dialogue, works against the development of a critical orientation toward the world, restricts rather than expands the discursive universe within which people might reflectively and actively participate, and is thus thoroughly dehumanising.

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