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WORLD

France's Guardians of National Identity Rue U.S. Contagion

Political Correctness Goes Haute

BY JUDITH WARNER

It all started about four years ago, when François Furet, arguably the most prominent of the current crop of French historians and a regular instructor at the University of Chicago, was interviewed by *Le Nouvel Observateur*, a major French newsweekly, about the closing of the American mind. He described a fractious academic world divided by race and gender, dropping some terms like *ideological orthodoxy* and *morals police*, and the story caught on like wildfire.

With a speed and efficiency that would put U.S. New Right direct-mail czar Richard Viguerie to shame, the French intellectual world was electrified. Suddenly, there was talk of "reverse McCarthyism," "Orwellianism," and a "witch hunt at American universities." Suddenly, talk of "*campus de concentration*"; a "terrorist" intellectual climate; a "repressive academic atmosphere." Alan Dershowitz was testifying in the press about the "puritanism, ultrafeminism," and "dictatorship of minorities" that had infected the American left. Dinesh D'Souza's *Illiberal Education* was published in translation, as was Arthur Schlesinger Jr.'s *The Disuniting of America*. Soon followed work by fellow culture warriors such as Robert Hughes, Camille Paglia, and Richard Bernstein, the reporter at *The New York Times* often credited with coining the term "politically correct" as we now know it.

EXPORTING p.c. bashing to France is perhaps one of the greatest—and strangest—victories the American right can claim.

The French, too, had discovered political correctness.

By this spring, p.c. fever was everywhere. It was on the air-waves, where radical feminist Andrea Dworkin shook and shouted, and the students of Antioch talked about correct dating and sex protocols. It was in the bookstores, where tomes like Edward Luttwak's *Le Rêve Américain en Danger* (*The Endangered American Dream*) and Edward Behr's *Une Amérique Qui Fait Peur* (*A Dangerous America*) chronicled the collapse of American culture through demoralizing exigencies like international trade wars, the Menendez brothers, multiple personality disorder, and, of course, political correctness.

It was in the air during this year's presidential campaign, when the now elected Jacques Chirac denounced his challenger, Edouard Balladur, his detractors, and whomever and whatever didn't quite fit his program as "politically correct." And it was even in bold type in the kiosks when actor Hugh Grant's arrest for trysting with a Hollywood prostitute was proclaimed a triumph of the "sexually correct."

Exporting p.c. bashing to France is perhaps one of the greatest—and strangest—victories the American right can claim. For not only have D'Souza, former U.S. education secretary William Bennett, and people of that ilk managed, with perfect fluency, to make their ideology masquerade here as fact, they also have managed to sell their antifeminist, antiaffirmative action, antimulticulturalist bill of goods to a surprisingly receptive French left. *Illiberal Education*, a tract funded by the Washington, D.C.–based conservative Olin Foundation, was printed here by the prestigious Gallimard publishing company and was widely accepted as an objective assessment of the state of affairs in the American academy. And no one, reading Furet's words, thought to suggest that his longstanding friendship with *The Closing of the American Mind* author Allan Bloom and association with Bloom's Committee on Social Thought at the University of Chicago might have distorted his views of the American academic left.

But then, the attack on American political correctness in France really has had very little to do with the facts. Rather, it has anchored itself on what sociologist Eric Fassin calls a "culturalist fallacy." As Fassin puts it: "Since there are so few professionals working on American society in France, every intellectual wants to have the definitive truth on the United States. The culturalist fallacy is based on a synecdoche: Everything you hear of the U.S. *is* the U.S., and from any story you can deduce anything about the U.S. because the whole is present in any part.

"The only problem," says Fassin—a professor at the Ecole Normale Supérieure who spent five years teaching at New York University and has written extensively on American political correctness and how French intellectuals view it—"is that people are selecting stories, and they're selecting stories that are quite biased."

The contention by p.c. bashers that the United States has been taken over by the thought police plays well in France because it fits the larger story an overwhelmingly anti-American left tells itself: that America is a McCarthyite, puritanical, and hypocritical society that finds only surface solutions to deep-rooted political, social, and economic problems. Thus, because common knowledge here holds that American feminists are hysterical, man-hating harpies whose obsession with sexual harassment and rape has taken all the fun out of life, Katie Roiphe's factually junky, date rape-debunking *The Morning After* reads as The Truth and can serve as the basis of very serious arguments in a new book by prominent essayist Pascal Bruckner. Thus, philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, having read a shred or two about the Robespierre-like quality of America's tenured radicals, can muse, with a straight face, that "in the United States, the apostles of political correctness say you shouldn't say 'black,' but 'melanin-advantaged.' "

In the most egregious episode in this fact-flouting free-for-all, respected journalist Victor Loupan went to Harvard, "the temple of political correctness," and, in the course of comparing the study of French there to his own education in Moscow under Brezhnev, committed such gross factual errors that, in a later issue, *Le Figaro* magazine had to devote four full pages to letters, mostly from Harvard professors, setting the record straight. Loupan had described a course that wasn't being given, mocked the technique of a professor who happened to be in Berlin, and declared that, of the women faculty members in the French department at Harvard, only Alice Jardine had "any semblance of university qualifications."

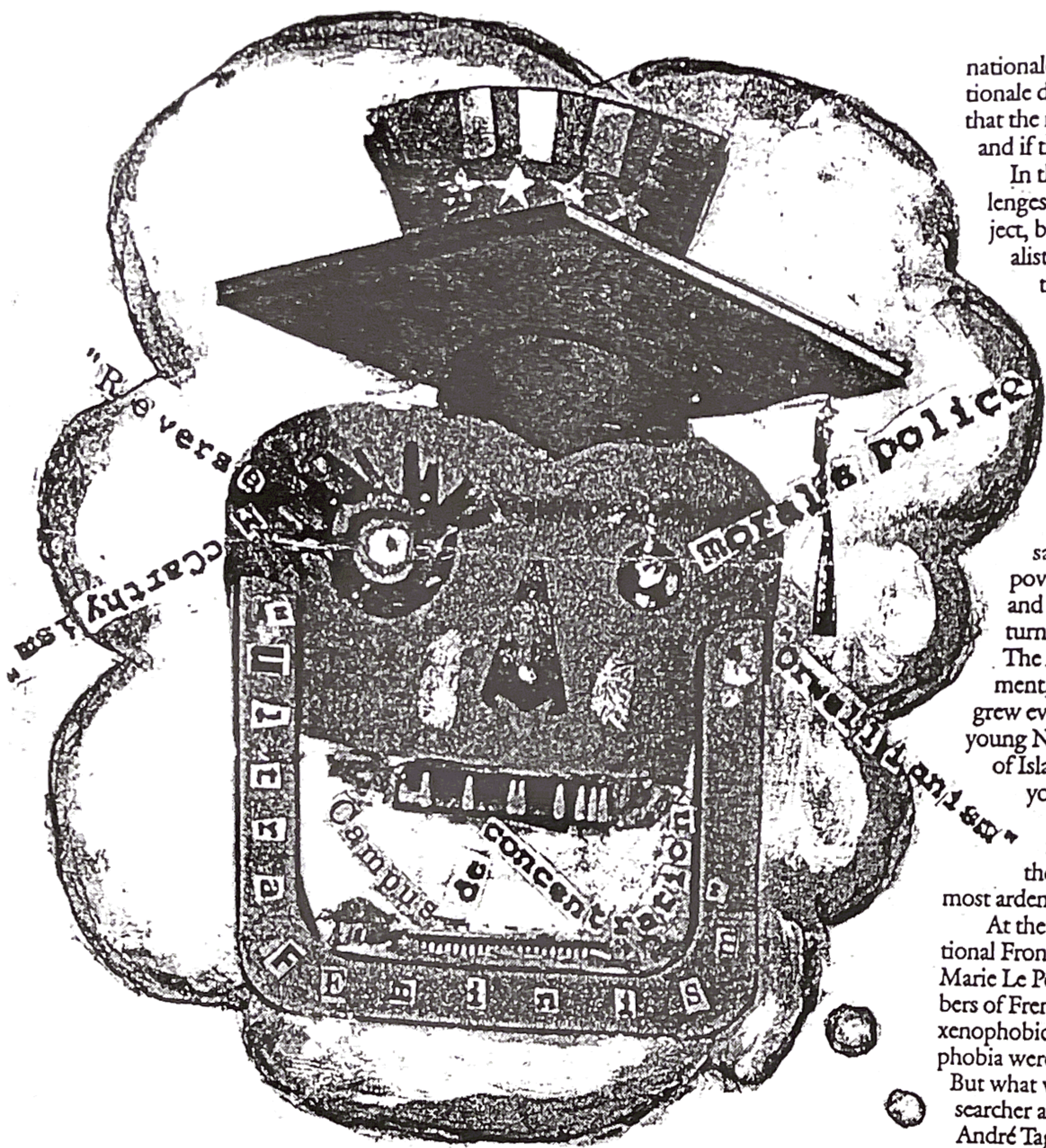
"What qualifications?" he asked. "A translation of French into English. Of what? A book by [French psychoanalyst and literary theorist] Julia Kristeva."

In response, Jardine, author of *Gynésis* and editor of four other books, and her colleague, Susan Suleiman, author of five, sued for defamation. Although *Le Figaro* is known to be a mouthpiece for the center-right, Loupan's article, in its tone and content, could have appeared in any journal sympathetic to the left.

"It sells newspapers," says Danielle Haase-Dubosc, a professor of 18th-century French literature who had followed the Jardine and Suleiman case. She is also director of Reid Hall, a Franco-American university center based in Paris. "It makes good copy to find something ridiculous in the American way of doing things while bolstering the French sense of identity at the same time."

That twofer—attacking things American while elevating things French—comes at a time that the French national identity is in acute crisis, and it lies at the heart of what the current vogue of p.c. madness is all about. Questions of identity politics are tearing at the very soul of the French republic, and no one, particularly on the left, has been able to come up with any rational answers.

The French have always had a mercurial love/hate relationship with America. Sometimes it tips more to love—though, as regards the left, it's usually more toward



WARREN LINN

hate—but it's never anything other than ambivalent. And it doesn't help any that the French tend to view America both as their greatest cultural ally and their purest antithesis, finding in the United States everything they don't want to be and yet fear that they already are. As Bruckner puts it: "When we interest ourselves in America, it's with an eye to anticipating what might happen here—to anticipate it, and, if possible, avoid it." In his new book, *La Tentation de l'Innocence* (*The Temptation of Innocence*), he writes, tellingly: "America has the great quality of anticipating the maladies of modernity like a loupe, a magnifying glass, which makes legible pathologies that we can't discern. Because it's ahead in the battle against discrimination, it's at the same time our model and our foil; in revealing its impasses, it permits us to avoid them."

In truth, as the frequent disregard for the facts of life on U.S. campuses proves, all the talk about political correctness isn't really about a fear of contagion by the misguided forces of the American left. It isn't really about a fear of contagion by things American at all. It's a fear of enemies within—of a rise in adherents to a French version of identity politics that, many intellectuals fear, threatens to shatter some of the governing ideals of the French republic. And when the French discussion of political correctness moves beyond the magazine-selling headlines and TV-soundbite sensationalism, it leads to some very thought-provoking explorations of citizenship and community that are as uniquely French as they are exquisitely nuanced.

What French intellectuals say they despise most in American political correctness—the identity politics associated with multiculturalism and feminism—rests on an idea of the political subject that is totally at odds with France's most sacred principles of universalism and integration. Shaped by the revolution of 1789, these precepts hold that there is a universal French citizen and a single French identity.

"Theoretically, you become transparent under the republic," says Haase-Dubosc. "You have no difference. Difference is a private matter. You don't put your ethnic origins on the table."

Not on the table, not on your census form, not in the ballot box. French republicanism holds that there should be no intermediary bodies between the citizen and the centralized state. No divisive religious groups, no ethnic communities.

"The essential problem is that of integration versus communitarianism," says Marie-Christine Granjon, a researcher at the Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales, a division of the Fondation Nationale de Sciences Politiques. "The idea is that the nation has to have a single culture, and if there are too many, it will fall apart."

In the past, there were constant challenges to this republican ideal of the subject, but they were always from the royalist or racist right, which abhorred the idea of a citizen divorced from the defining roots of ancestry and land. In the early 1990s, however, when p.c. paranoia first hit France, communitarianism was raising its head in new quarters, among the *beurs*, first-generation North Africans born in France. They saw the contradictions of French universalism in the persistent racism and poverty their families encountered and had to endure and, increasingly, turned toward a non-French identity. The Algerian fundamentalist movement, FIS (Front Islamique du Salut), grew ever more influential in drawing young North Africans to live by the rule of Islamic law. Greater numbers of young women began wearing the chador, and a fear that Muslim fundamentalism might take over the suburbs overcame some of the most ardent defenders of integration.

At the same time, the ultraright National Front, led by the charismatic Jean-Marie Le Pen, was pulling impressive numbers of French voters into its ranks with a xenophobic platform. Racism and xenophobia were not new to France; far from it. But what was new, argued prominent researcher and right-wing watcher Pierre-André Taguieff in his highly influential book, *La Force du Prejug* (*The Force of Prejudice*), was the turn that Le Pennist xenophobia took. The ideological epicenter of the National Front's racism, according to Taguieff, was communitarianism. Le Pen and his followers, he argued, believed in what was for France a new form of racism, a "differentialist racism," which held that immigrants were unacceptable not because they were biologically different but because they were culturally unassimilable.

The left found itself caught between a rock and a hard place. With the right arguing that immigrants had to be excluded from France because they were too different, the left took the position that France could include them—had to include them—because they were not different at all. Rather than questioning the limits of their universalist ideal, the left instead clung to it all the more strongly. Even the main antiracism group, SOS Racisme, shifted its thrust from an emphasis on identity to an emphasis on integration.

"With the rise of Le Pen, universalism was seen as possibly being our only defense against the kind of differentialist discourse propounded by the extreme right," Fassin says. "So anyone holding differentialist views could be held accountable for helping Le Pen's rise."

One thinker who has continued to uphold the multiculturalist ideal is Françoise Gaspard, now a professor at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales. A former socialist mayor of the city of Dreux, she was trounced in 1983 by a right-wing coalition. Her defeat was one of the cardinal events that heralded the arrival of Le Pen's party on the political scene. In 1989, when the issue of whether to allow Muslim girls to wear their head scarves to school sent most intellectuals scurrying to defend the republic, Gaspard took the unpopular view of defending them. She was marginalized,

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called "politically correct à l'Américaine" for her views, and today turns a rather jaundiced eye on the ubiquitous condemnation of multiculturalism in France.

"This global condemnation, shared by left and right, distanced us from the question of immigration," she says. "The reality is that to deny multiculturalism in France is impossible because our society *is* multicultural. Today, there's a fear that what we call republicanism will collapse under the tensions and conflicts between groups, and we feel that in denying people's identities, in hiding them, we can avoid conflict. But what it leads to is the invisible black, the invisible Jew, the invisible woman.

"In France, you're free to have your religion, your sexual orientation, but all that should not be seen," Gaspard adds. "At base, French 'political correctness' is just that: the disappearance of particular identity in the public space to the profit of French 'type.' And it's there that things are cracking up, exploding, because we no longer know what that French 'type' is."

In the past few months, there has been a subtle shift in how the French talk about p.c. This spring, a Paris court found in favor of Alice Jardine, ruling that *Le Figaro* had acted improperly when it falsely reported her academic credentials (Susan Suleiman's suit was dismissed on a technicality). Jardine was awarded 150,000 francs, about $30,000, reportedly the most the newspaper has ever paid out in a lawsuit. *Le Nouvel Observateur* ran a "Counter Inquiry Into Political Correctness" feature just last April in which a reporter visited the French department at the University of California at Berkeley and found everyone all smiles. And this summer, the journal *Esprit* took an open mind in organizing a forum of essays on multiculturalism.

"There's been an evolution in the discussion of political correctness," says Granjon. "There is now at least a discussion. There is at least a willingness to acknowledge different views."

That may be true. Or, it may just be that the French are growing tired of political correctness, especially now that the phrase has begun to be applied to French political thought as well.

"Politically correct," applied to France, has a different meaning, of course. It means an allegiance to a party line, to the thought of the majority—what the French disparagingly refer to as "*la pensée unique.*" That slippage of the expression into a floating signifier greatly annoys bashers of American political correctness such as Bernard-Henri Lévy. He insists that Chirac floated the "p.c." insult in his campaign out of sheer ignorance, mistaking the initials for those of his longtime enemy, the Parti Communiste. But other intellectuals here hold out the hope that the French, at long last, may see themselves in the distorting mirror they've long turned on American identity politics.

"It's funny and very strange that French intellectuals tend to critique the excesses of political correctness on the one hand, and, on the other hand, we have not yet entered into our own debate on the problems that have been debated in the United States for the past 20 years," says Guy Sorman, a writer and social critic who heads the magazine *L'Esprit Libre*. "We think we're beyond the debate, but the day will come when we will have to clean our own house."

Last June, 60,000 lesbians and gays turned out in the streets of Paris for a Gay Pride celebration, and French leftist intellectuals, sympathetic to the cause of equality under the law, once again returned to the old conundrums: How to balance the identity of an individual against the identity of the state? How to maintain "transparency" without becoming invisible?

"Will we soon see in France blacks, Arabs, Jews, gays, Catholics, Muslims, Buddhists, and Seventh Day Adventists drawing together into separate, and soon hostile, communities?" Laurent Joffrin, a commentator in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, asked. "This differentialism, so contrary to the universalist tradition, won't it just lead to sterile and dangerous confrontations? Should homosexuals fight in the name of their single identity, through which they see all things as through a prism, or should it be as citizens, claiming equal rights on the basis of common values?"

If the highly contagious example of the United States can offer any clue, these questions are more likely to multiply than be answered any time soon. The questioning itself may be a form of solution. ❖

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