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On Books: A Politically Incorrect Study of PC

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Books such as Arthur Schlesinger's "The Disuniting of America," Robert Hughes's "Culture of Complaint" and other recent works attacking American multiculturalism make for a crowded field. But these works have been long on rhetoric and short on reporting, which makes Richard Bernstein's "Dictatorship of Virtue" (Knopf, 367 pages, \$25) a refreshing addition. A New York Times reporter and a self-professed liberal, Mr. Bernstein is sympathetic to the multiculturalist impulse even as he scrupulously catalogs its many excesses.

Yet the book has received a hostile reception from liberal voices who might have been expected to be more supportive. While these critics would seem to carry no brief for multiculturalism, their rejection of Mr. Bernstein's book once again underscores the problematic status of identity politics in the liberal imagination, and the nervousness that many liberal journalists feel in aligning themselves with positions that might be considered conservative.

A report from the field, Mr. Bernstein's book describes how extensively ideologues of the cultural left have built up a multicultural bureaucracy within the major institutions of American life, from newsrooms and museum offices to government agencies, elementary schools and, of course, university campuses. Although Mr. Bernstein affirms the movement's noble aim of inclusion, he denounces the "slide" into intolerance and rigidity, and the way in which minor lapses of judgment are used by ideologues to demand ever more compensatory multicultural initiatives.

At the Philadelphia Inquirer, accusations by black staffers that a controversial editorial advising Norplant for unwed mothers was racist led to calls for an editor's dismissal, to flagellatory sensitivity seminars and to hiring quotas. On one of the university campuses he surveys, Mr. Bernstein discovers a training session for resident dorm advisers wherein trainees are required to watch hard-core homosexual pornography while trainers roam the room with cameras to record facial reactions for signs of bias. At the University of Texas, an attempt to turn a freshman composition course into a political sensitivity training seminar is defeated, but not before the lone dissident is smeared and made into a pariah.

The most distressing material in Mr. Bernstein's book involves primary and secondary education, where educators push the idea that America has no common culture nor anything redeeming to offer the world. "Why do they teach us that white people suck?" one Brookline, Mass., grade-schooler wants to know. Meanwhile, diversity and difference take on fetishistic aspects and are championed with a cultlike intensity. In perhaps the book's boldest statement, Mr. Bernstein says the schools refuse to acknowledge that not all cultural styles are equal and that some breed success better than others -- a vast disservice, he argues, to the poor and oppressed whom the ideologues claim to champion.

Mr. Bernstein is strong when capturing multiculturalism's internal contradictions. While pretending to a universal vision, multiculturalists conveniently ignore unprogressive aspects of the non-Western world. Although the movement makes a cause of celebrating difference, it is intolerant of true differences, especially if they come in conservative packaging.

Mr. Bernstein's tone is at times a little overwrought, and the analogies he draws between multiculturalism and Stalinism, the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the French Terror -- his title comes from Robespierre -- seem needlessly portentous. But whatever its shortcomings, the book gives far better than it has gotten.

In most of the important critical venues, Mr. Bernstein has been dismissed with unbecoming condescension by moderate liberals who would be outraged if they themselves were ever subjected, personally or professionally, to the PC regimes that Mr. Bernstein documents so well. Sidestepping the book's most important issues, Mr. Bernstein's critics dwell on subsidiary ones and treat his moral urgency with complacency.

For New Republic literary editor Leon Wieseltier, who reviewed the book for the New York Times Book Review, Mr. Bernstein's effort was "important" but "weak," a study of cultural panic that is itself "a little

panicked." The author "flirts with false and ugly notions about the superiority of some civilizations over others." Striking a pose of pious equanimity, Mr. Wieseltier assures us -- unrealistically -- that "the airless, cheerless order of the diversity police will be defeated by the diversity of the land in which they have prospered."

Even more dismissive was Nicholas Lemann in the daily Times, who claimed that Mr. Bernstein's examples had been written about so often as "to form a miniature canon" and that Mr. Bernstein was only joining an anti-PC backlash. "The effect upon the unconverted . . . could be exactly the opposite of what Mr. Bernstein would want," Mr. Lemann predicted, "namely to give rise to the suspicion that there might be less to the multicultural victory than meets the eye."

The most withering attack came from Louis Menand in the New York Review of Books. Although he agreed that calls for diversity were accompanied by a rigid intolerance for differences of opinion, he found Mr. Bernstein's thesis far-fetched. Not enough evidence had been assembled, he claimed, to prove that our cultural life was being run by doctrinaire multiculturalists. Asserting that Mr. Bernstein resorted to the same distortions as his foes, Mr. Menand dwells inordinately on whether a certain professors' organization had indeed ignored the plight of the ostracized University of Texas professor. (The letters' exchange that followed a few weeks later seemed to confirm Mr. Bernstein's account.) In any case, concerning multicultural excesses, Mr. Menand dismissed any worries with assurances that "things ought to shake out."

Such criticisms say more about a central problem of the liberal sensibility than they do about Mr. Bernstein's book. Exhibiting the kind of denial that has been the besetting sin of liberalism for the past 30 years, these writers fail to acknowledge the challenge that multiculturalism represents -- to American society and to their own principles and politics. As Mr. Bernstein illustrates, multiculturalism has proved itself hostile to individual rights, equal rights, free speech and the culture of principled dissent. Indeed, disenchantment with the multiculturalist vision and its spread through American society was surely one factor in the Democrats' historic recent defeat. Sooner or later Mr. Bernstein's insouciant critics will have to acknowledge that, in the time it takes for things to "shake out," liberalism itself could go down for the count.

Mr. McGowan is writing a book about identity politics and the press.

