‘Compassion’ on Campus

Being offended has become a political agenda, even a full-time vocation for some people

With commencement season comes a summer respite from attacks on freedom of speech on campuses. Consider the University of Pennsylvania, whose recently resigned provost Sheldon Hackney, is heading for Washington to chair the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Penn's thought police are persecuting a Jewish student because late one night, when he was trying to study and a black sorority group was being noisy beneath his window, he shouted, "Will you water buffaloes get out of here?" The Hebrew word behama, meaning water oxen, is a slang putdown meaning doct. The blacks say their feelings were hurt and—therefore—he is guilty of "racial harassment.

When some other blacks at Penn were offended by a conservative columnist in the student newspaper, they met delivery trucks early one morning and dumped 14,000 copies into trash bins. Hackney gave this cringingly neutral description of this Brownshirt behavior: the papers "were removed from their regular distribution points." He said two important values, "diversity" and "open expression," needed to be balanced.

Penn State feminists stole 6,000 copies of a conservative paper. Dartmouth blacks collected as "litter" a conservative newspaper distributed in dorms. At Penn, Penn State, Dartmouth and elsewhere blacks, feminists, homosexuals and various ethnic groups are asserting a right not to be annoyed or have their feelings hurt by words.

The menace of this "right" is the subject of Jonathan Rauch's elegant new book, "Kindly Inquiries: The New Attacks on Free Thought." The right not to be offended, far from promoting civility on campus, is, he says, provoking acrimonious contests to see who can claim to be most, and most frequently, offended, and to decide which groups' being offended matters. Special solicitude is shown to "historically oppressed classes"—basically, everyone except white heterosexual males. Being offended has become a political agenda, even a full-time vocation for some people. They are "thought vigilantes," on the prowl to punish people guilty of thinking prescribed thoughts. So some professors have stopped teaching courses on sensitive subjects (race, ethnicity, sexuality) and some professors tape their classes in case they must defend themselves against a career-threatening charge of "insensitivity."

Religious fundamentalists try to compel "equal time" in school curricula for creationism and evolution. But they are less of a threat than liberals trying to mandate "fairness" for dotty ideas that make some "victim groups" feel good—ideas such as that Greek culture came from Black Africa, or that Iroquois ideas were important to the making of the Constitution.

Speech codes are wielded by inquisitors sniffing for punishable utterances. But Rauch shows the difficulty of writing a rule to prescribe, say, the word "nigger": "Persons shall not use the word 'nigger' in direct conversation with black persons, unless the word is being used demonstratively or illustratively or both parties to the conversation are black or dark-skinned or the intentions are friendly as evinced by signs and gestures attesting to the conversation's mutual congeniality such as smiles, handshakes or affectionate language . . . Nothing in these rules shall be interpreted as prescribing Huckleberry Finn except when it is read aloud to a black person or persons in a taunting or confrontational manner, as evinced by undue emphasis on words such as 'nigger,' 'slave,' 'owner,' or when it is read in other circumstances which a reasonable person might regard as prejudicial and offensive . . ." That is amusing. The following is not.

At the University of Michigan a student was punished for saying in a classroom discussion that homosexuality is a disease treatable with therapy. Expression of that idea supposedly violated the prohibition of speech that "victimizes people on the basis of "sexual orientation." At Southern Methodist University a student was sentenced to 30 hours of community service with minority organizations. His crimes included singing "We Shall Overcome" in a sarcastic manner.

University of Connecticut rules made punishable "inappropriately directed laughter" and "conspicuous exclusion of another person" from conversation. At the University of Wisconsin, a speech code forbade utterances that "demean anyone's race, sex, religion, color, creed, disability, sexual orientation, national origin, ancestry or age," or which created "an intimidating, hostile or demeaning environment for education." So a student was sentenced for telling an Asian-American that "It's people like you—that's the reason this country is screwed up."

Wisconsin's code was declared unconstitutional, as was Michigan's, the guidelines for which gave this example of a punishable offense: "A male student makes remarks in a class like 'Women just aren't as good in this field as men,'" thus creating a hostile learning atmosphere for female classmates. The guidelines also said, in Orwellian language, that in order to have "open and vigorous" classroom discussion, students must be protected from "feeling harassed or intimidated." So people could silence others by announcing that they were "feeling" a hostile environment.

Much mischief: But not all sensibilities are equally protected. UCLA suspended a student editor for a cartoon making fun of affirmative action. Then Cal State Northridge disciplined an editor for criticizing UCLA. No one would have been punished for calling critics of affirmative action Neanderthals. When Hackney was criticized for his invertebrate response to the destruction of 14,000 newspapers, a former university president offered this limp defense of him: "Penn is a public university and is thus not technically bound by the Bill of Rights."

Contemporary liberalism’s core value is "compassion." On campuses that means the prevention of the pain caused to "historically oppressed classes" by words they dislike. Many academics, because of their shrill and loopy politics (which permeates and trivializes their scholarship), are irrelevant to the nation’s political conversation. So they concentrate on turning their campuses into little lagoons of enforced orthodoxy and policed "sensitivity." They are making much mischief, and many conservatives.
True lies vs. total recall

The current issue of Commentary has a very funny article by Wendy Shalit, an undergraduate at Williams College, on how life among the politically correct goes these days on an elite campus. Much of the article deals with her fruitless search for a women’s bathroom that doesn’t have men in it (banning men from the premises would be “exclusionary of one gender” and might imply that males and females are somehow quite different—a no-no in the PC worldview).

Along the way she discusses the off-the-wall intellectual habits now being incubated on campus. She frequently hears her befuddled classmates say that the Holocaust didn’t actually occur—rather, it “has purchase, compared with the currency derived from other events,” or as one male student summed up, though it may not have happened, it’s “a perfectly reasonable conceptual hallucination.”

For only $25,000 a year, you too can ship your children to a college like Williams and have them learn to think this way. The New Yorker’s book critic, James Wolcott, calls it “the blithe disregard of truth” in postmodern thinking. In the postmodern, posteverything worldview, there is no objectivity or truth. Everything is relative. Nothing is better or truer than anything else.

Knowledge is politically constructed, an extension of power. As written by Western scholars, history is not a record of what happened. It is a political white-male story that must be replaced by other stories.

In their purest and most lunatic form, these ideas have not flourished in the real world, only on campus, our national holding pen for zany thinking. But they are always leaking out here and there, mixing with the new tribalism and the self-esteem movement to create real-world problems.

Intellectual cover. The textbook wars, for instance, show that each racial, ethnic and religious tribe now expects the power to judge and veto what is written about it. Some of this demand is normal democratic politics. But post-everything arguments provide the intellectual cover: if all stories are valid and all cultures are equal, then nobody but a member of the tribe can write its history. This is why you hear total silence from campus historians when, for example, Afrocentrists teach schoolchildren that Egyptian pilots were flying gliders around Africa in ancient times and black astronomers were able to pick out a faint star (Sirius B) long before the telescopes needed to see it were actually invented. As some of Shalit’s classmates might say, these ideas “have purchase” because they are strongly felt. Who cares if they are true? What’s truth anyway?

This embarrassing development has led to two contra-dictory ideas: (1) nothing is true, but (2) what I say, or my group says, is true because it is so strongly held. The mantra of the sexual-abuse recovery movement is “If you think you were abused, you were.” because thinking makes it so. Here you needn’t even believe very strongly to be guaranteed of truth. One of the movement’s gurus, E. Sue Blume, says that doubts about whether abuse occurred and the thought “maybe it’s my imagination” are both symptoms of “post-incest syndrome.” In any case, the truth doesn’t really matter. As one repressed-memory therapist told PBS’s “Frontline” program: “I don’t care if it’s true. What actually happened is irrelevant to me.”

A version of this pops up repeatedly in the antirape movement. Check back on all the recent notorious cases of fake rape allegations, and you will usually find somebody arguing that the truth doesn’t matter.

After the Tawana Brawley case, an article in the way-left Nation magazine said: “In cultural perspective, if not in fact, it doesn’t matter whether the crime occurred or not.”

At Vassar, false rape accusations against several males were no big deal to the assistant dean of students. She said coolly: “They have a lot of pain. But it is not a pain that I would necessarily have spared them.” Her argument was that even if they weren’t actual rapists, they should explore their potential for becoming rapists. And after a rape charge that tore the Princeton campus apart was shown to be false, anti-rape activists still rallied around the accuser, saying, according to one account: “Listen, we can’t hope to find truth in all these stories. The goal is to reveal these women as ‘victims of oppression’ through which the crimes of the patriarchy can be exposed.”

The key to this hard-line thinking is this: Ever since the radical wing of feminism more or less ate mainstream feminism alive, the premise of the movement has been that women are everywhere under siege and oppressed by a common enemy: men. With this large truth in hand, it doesn’t matter much whether this oppressor or that one is literally guilty of rape. This is penny-ante stuff. They are all guilty because rape is a paradigm of male-female relations under the evil patriarchy.

Nowadays it is best to be wary of movements with large blustering truths in hand and the firm conviction that petty, pesky, literal truth therefore almost doesn’t matter. Our century has seen a lot of this argument—that dishonesty or indifference to truth is justified by one’s commitment to a cause. Now, we just have to deal with the current college edition of this, what Wendy Shalit calls the “corrupt moral and intellectual habits” being spawned on campus.