

Academia Embraces Own Future Shock

It has been so easy to make fun of politically correct academia that it is hard to shock the public anymore in exposing how the intellectual elites think. It's particularly difficult to write satire after surveying the titles of courses at prestigious universities, as reported in *Comedy and Tragedy*, published by Young America's Foundation. Among my favorites:

- The University of Chicago offers "Fat Boys: Introduction to Literature and Medicine." This course, we learn, runs against the standard study format which stresses the meaning of fat in constructing the modern female body, instead focusing on obesity and masculinity in the Western tradition. Recommended reading includes Shakespeare plays featuring Falstaff as well as Rabelais' *Gargantua*. You might say the University of Chicago thinks big.

- The University of Pennsylvania teaches "Vampires: The Undead," which explores the persistence of the image of vampires in literature and film, emphasizing "their metaphoric deftness and adaptability as cultural couriers." This is a course the students can sink their teeth into.

- "Gender in Music" at Reed College analyzes music as "ethos" which tames the savage beast, as "social discourse" in ladies' entertainment, as "Affect" which refers to sexual drives in "the masculinity of strong cadences" and as "neutered" in the cult of the castrato in 17th-century opera. Roll over, Beethoven.

There are lots more where these came from as well as a host of esoteric debates concerning the nature of "phallogentrism," "queer theory" and the celebration of the perverse in Western thought. At the root of these topics is a deconstructive point of view that says the interpretation of literature depends on how you answer a new version of the question made famous in the Watergate scandal: "What did the author know and when did he know it?" If the author or composer is a Dead White Male who came of age in the Enlightenment, then you have phallogentric, aggressive male cadences of oppression.

As bad as politically correct gobbledegook is in academia and as much as it intellectually hurts the students who buy into it, it has little impact on the larger culture. A more serious problem emerges when what's politically correct is crystal clear and dangerous.

I recently was invited to speak at Princeton by a group

of students who call themselves Princeton Students Against Infanticide, or PSAI. No, they're not killing babies at Princeton, but they actually are "debating" the circumstances when killing babies is justified. Princeton has hired Peter Singer, a bioethicist, to teach in a tenured chair at its Center for Human Values. Singer advocates killing disabled infants, up to 28 days after birth, as a humane course of action. He writes: "Killing a disabled infant is not morally equivalent to killing a person. Very often it is not wrong at all." He would waste infants with spina bifida, Down's syndrome and hemophilia.

In *Practical Ethics*, a textbook he will assign, Singer writes: "The total view makes it necessary to ask whether the death of the hemophilic infant would lead to the creation of another being who would not otherwise have existed. . . . When the death of a disabled infant will lead to the birth of another infant with better prospects of a happy life, the total amount of happiness will be greater if the disabled infant is killed. The loss of a happy life for the first infant is outweighed by the gain of a happier life for the second."

Some Germans were particularly sensitive to Singer's ideas because those ideas echo the Nazi doctrine of killing "unworthy infants," including the physically disabled and the mentally impaired. Singer's scheduled lectures in Germany were canceled after protests. Left-wing German feminists were particularly appalled that he drew a moral equivalence between abortion, which they favor, and infanticide, which they regard as Hitlerian.

Many disabled adults attended the Princeton protests in wheelchairs. "Singer's views are an affront to people living with disabilities," says Nadina LaSpina, a member of a disability-rights group called Not Dead Yet: "He says that our lives are expendable and that we are not people."

Harold Shapiro, president of Princeton, defends Singer's appointment in the name, natch, of academic freedom. But Singer, in his own words, is an advocate as

much as an academic. "The whole point of ethics is to guide practice," he writes. Professor Robert George, who teaches philosophy of law and civil liberties at Princeton and who has been appointed by President Clinton to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, says the Singer appointment "gives legitimacy to the practice of infanticide."

A letter writer to the *Princeton Alumni Weekly Magazine* asks: Why would the once noble Princeton University hire a deranged, murderous, dangerously radical maniac? But the assumption behind the question is only half right. Peter Singer is not a deranged maniac. He is a scholar who is highly respected by his colleagues at the once noble Princeton. That's what's really sad, and more than a little scary.

By Suzanne Fields



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