

# Tolerance and Neutrality in the University

## Section VI

### Article summaries

#### This section is made up of 3 readings:

1. Purdy, Laura - Politics and the College Curriculum. (pg. 236-264)
2. Mohanty, Chandra - Dangerous Territories, Territorial power and Education' (pg. 1-19)
3. Kolakowski, Lezek - Neutrality and Academic Values. (pg. 72-85)

#### Summary of Purdy article:

There is a war on over the curriculum in higher education. This war is very important because whatever is taught in the curriculum will largely influence what educated people know and think and that, in turn, makes a significant difference in how we all live.

#### There are 2 groups fighting over the curriculum:

1. Traditionalists - think the curriculum is fine the way it is. They believe the curriculum is partly a neutral representation of truth/reality and the rest is composed of works chosen for their excellence according to objective principles. A neutral university must a neutral curriculum that is based on objective works and critical inquiry. They believe that if we start examining history from such perspectives such as feminism or race, then the curriculum is being contaminated with inferior works and is becoming more politicized.
2. Revolutionaries - believe that the picture of the world presented in current curriculum is seriously biased because it does not take into account

such categories as gender, race, and class. The curriculum is not neutral with respect to these categories.

Revolutionaries come in 2 varieties:

- A) Radicals - they want more time for 'outsiders' works that will help fix the rampant exclusions in the curriculum.
- B) Liberals - they argue that changes are necessary 'to provide a more truthful account of our history and cultural heritage'

The author's aim in this paper is to see what can be said on behalf of feminist philosophy in response to traditionalist objections. She wants to see whether revolutionary contributions necessarily weaken the curriculum (as traditionalists suggest). She also wants to see to what extent the revolutionary works are compatible with rigorous critical inquiry. She wants to examine the notion that a neutral university/curriculum can include Feminist works.

Purdy starts by giving an overview of the history of higher education and about women's place in human society. She makes these points:

- women were barred from the first colleges
- history, as a discipline in higher education, is relatively new (beginning in 1881)
- higher education has only been available to women for a little more than 100 years
- there are very few influential women in academia and thus, women do not influence higher education curriculum
- higher education curricula has been written mostly by men who think of women as intellectually inferior

Thus, the curricula in higher education is a constantly evolving group of courses and programs that are responsive to a variety of influences.

The author states that most influential writers see women as inferior - unable to reason well and unable to think without emotion. They have been unable to see that what is good for women may, in fact, be good for society.

Traditionalists do not want revolutionaries influencing the curricula because they feel that they are relativists and they are politicizing it. Thus, any claim by feminists that may challenge the traditionalist view of history is not

rational because feminists are liberal revolutionaries who are also relativists who only want to politicize the curricula. They believe that any Feminist works would not be neutral.

Traditionalists say that relativists are people who are incapable of making objective value judgments. Purdy goes on to extensively explain that liberal revolutionaries are not relativists and indeed believe that an objective view exists (although it is difficult to achieve).

Traditionalists believe Feminists are politicizing the curricula - meaning that they are inappropriately injecting political considerations into the scholarly world. Traditionalists believe revolutionaries have political convictions which are connected to lack of integrity. Purdy goes on to explain that everyone has political convictions but as long as the scholars follow the basic rules of good scholarship, then there is no problem with having political convictions.

So, does feminism undermine good scholarship by interfering with scholarly openness (as traditionalists would contend)?

Purdy defines feminism:

- it is generally agreed that women's interests are not treated with the same respect as those of men and that justice requires that this state of affairs be remedied.
- Feminist philosophers are committed to eliminating male bias in ethics. Feminists believe that:
  - women are as important as men
  - women's interests are discounted, ignored, or not considered worthy of investigation at all
  - we should look at a given situation from the point of view of all the affected parties
  - we should try to understand why people do the things they do
  - attempt to come up with solutions to moral conflict that involve structural rather than purely individual change and to find remedies that spread const as equally as possible.
  - You should be quick to understand and sympathize but slow to condemn.

Apart from these approaches, Feminist work is conducted in the usual ways following the basic rules of scholarly work.

So, the traditionalist criticisms of academic feminism have no merit. Feminism is not relativism nor does it pursue inappropriately political agendas. Feminist work should be and is conducted according to rigorous standard of evidence and rationality. Thus, if being a neutral university/curriculum means being committed to critical inquiry, then it is okay to have Feminist point of views and scholarly works as the Feminist perspective is not in conflict with critical inquiry.

### Summary of Mohanty article:

This 'article' consists of a preface (Mohanty) and an introduction (Roman & Eyre) to a group of essays. These group of essays were put together to analyze and challenge the various lies that nations, educational institutions, and educators make through their formalized use of a rhetoric of difference and equality.

#### Preface (Mohanty):

The main theme offered by Mohanty in the preface is: 'We are left with no doubt whatsoever that struggles over difference and equality in education *matter*; that the struggles against domination and for social justice have to be waged situationally and regionally as well as globally; that the very basic ethical and moral notions of citizenship, belonging, and democracy are at stake here; and finally, that self-critical hard work is necessary to transform these unjust educational regimes.'

The author goes on to explain that the essays redefine the 'territories of power and privilege in education, expose dominant ideologies, and show that cultures of dissent exist and can be nurtured. These dangers and risks continue to exist and that speaking the truth to power continues to be dangerous.'

Mohanty talks in detail about her two recent experiences and how they illustrated the significance of borders (and indeed, redefining borders) in understanding the relations of power/knowledge in the consolidation of particular regimes of gender, race, class, and sexuality.

## Introduction (Roman & Eyre):

The authors explain here that the collection of essays in the book began as a debate (at a meeting) over the limits and possibilities of various 'anti-oppression' pedagogies in North American universities and how they have been affected by Right-wing assaults in the 1980's/90's. They discussed the impact of Right-wing politics on different anti-oppression pedagogies, equity policies, and non-traditional programs.

The authors put together this collection of essays to address the above issues as well as backlash politics and whether or not society could or should use a binary oppositional framework (i.e. Left-Right, backlash-progressive) when addressing these issues or, is that just too simplistic. This means that by lumping people as 'Left', do we overlook the interests of various other groups that make up the 'Left' - such as feminists, anti-racists, lesbians, gays?

Roman and Eyre state that a consistent theme that emerges in these essays is 'the historical and political value of learning from the defensive stances taken *within, across, and often in reaction to* various Left struggles, including feminisms, anti-racisms/critical multiculturalisms, and lesbian & gay politics'. Not only do we need to look at what the large 'Left' group is standing up for; but we need to look at what the subgroups are espousing. These essays redefine what the term 'backlash' really means with respect to the 'Left' and to the individual subgroups.

### The authors divided the essays into three sections:

Part 1 - The central concern in this section is how state power affects the organization of both Right and Left discourses.

Part 2 - This section illustrated that the academic and educational matters are not separable from social movements.

Part 3 - This section focuses on the private and public spheres of educational practice.

When discussing the articles in each section, Roman & Eyre seem to give a mini-synopsis of what the articles say/mean/imply or try to frame the articles by commenting on their purpose. Some examples are:

#### Part 1:

- In one article, readers are invited to consider how Canadian discourses around multiculturalism and moral panics concerning 'invading immigrants' contribute to new forms of sexism, racism, and neocolonialism. White western feminists should pay greater attention to the struggles of immigrant women, women of color, and indigenous Aboriginal women - lessons learned here will help us to understand the limitations of organizing feminism on a strictly national level and that we need to look at the issue globally.
- Other articles look at the concept of 'backlash'. Some authors find it a useful concept to study power and politics, others reject it outright, while still others can use the term but in a qualified manner.

#### Part 2:

- These articles emphasize that there is no university classroom that is free of the inequalities that exist in the larger society in which they are located.
- One author argues that the Right-wing attack on universities through the use of the notion of 'political correctness' endangers not only the quality of dialogue and interchanges, but also the meaning of the intellectual enterprise of public education.
- Another article tries to counter the notion that the politics of a 'Left' group as a whole can presume to speak for all women, gays, persons of color, etc. To do this, the author suggests a strategy whereby works that are not routinely taught in relation to one another be juxtaposed.
- In another article, the author discusses the many ways in which professional values and the institution of the university force here to be complicit with racism and white supremacy.
- Another article discusses a 'disturbing trend' within feminist pedagogy whereby there is a refusal to acknowledge or accept the differences within and among women.

### Part 3:

- There are authors that look at curricular guidelines on equality and assess their implications for the classroom
- Another article focuses on the controversies emerging from student complaints of sexism, racism, and heterosexism within the university. The author shows how feminists and anti-racists have become captured within the juridical frame. She examines how the new Right discourses - by appropriating the language of equality, discrimination, stereotyping, and inclusion - subtly seduce educators into thinking they are being progressive when in fact they are being just the opposite.
- One article traces the gender equity policy of British Columbia. The author examines how the government's gender-equity policy both promotes and impedes the transformative goals of feminism.
- Another article examines how cyberspace provides both dangers and opportunities to feminist education work.

Finally, the authors make some concluding remarks:

- No common term or umbrella term (i.e. Left) adequately describes the range of identities and political struggles that make up a radical social movement.
- If social movements are going to go beyond individualism in the struggle for equity, then it must clarify how time, particular groups, and political relations get articulated in educational practices, political activism, discourse, and popular memory.
- It will be a struggle to find the bases for a common cause and alliance when developing and sustaining new forms of transnational feminism, critical multiculturalism/anti-racisms/anti-imperialisms, and sexual politics.
- People will have to start to really analyze and acknowledge where positions taken by members of the 'Left' or progressive groups - including feminists, gays, lesbian, and anti-racists - are conflicted and where they are not.

## Summary of Kolakowski article:

Kolakowski defined neutrality by saying that neutrality implies certain things:

- Neutrality is always intentional.
- You cannot be neutral if you are a party to the conflict (you may be impartial, but not neutral).
- You cannot be neutral and impartial at the same time.
- It is neither necessarily virtuous or necessarily to be condemned.

Kolakowski then asks the abstract question: Is neutrality (as defined above) a real possibility?

**No:** Neutrality is impossible because if you avoid influencing the outcome of a conflict, you are in effect helping the stronger side. This presupposes that neutrality is always wrong.

**Yes:** The author's stance. Neutrality is possible and, whether justifiable or unjustifiable, it always results from weakness, though that weakness may not always be blameworthy nor always attributable to the person involved, but sometimes attributable to certain peculiarities of our culture.

The author then poses the question: Give the above definition and the argument that neutrality is possible, where does the 'political neutrality' of the university fit in?

If we suppose that universities are politically neutral, this would mean that it, as an institution, ought to refrain from taking positions in the controversial political issues under discussion in its society (this refers only to the institution as a whole - not mean the individuals who form it - teachers, administrators, students).

The detractors of this postulate say that:

1. The universities in democratic countries are politically involved anyway
2. It is impracticable for universities to say they are neutral as they serve society and are essentially organs of society.



There are 2 ways to look at the purpose of universities:

### 1. Liberal concept (the author supports this concept)

Universities fulfill 4 main tasks for society:

- Provide some professional training
- Continue to transmit human culture
- Enrich our knowledge about the world
- Teach and spread certain values that are applicable not only in scientific matters, but in all fields of social life, including the political: these values include impartiality in judgment, tolerance, criticism, obedience to logical rules.

This Liberal conception implies that in many domains there is a continuity of human culture and that some values are not confined to the particular interests of given political groups, social classes, ethnic, national, or racial communities. These values are fundamental to the university and transcend the interest of such groups.

### 2. Totalitarian concept

This implies that no human values exist that transcend the particular interests of one or other of the conflicting political groups. These are the competing values of different political or interest groups, social classes, and ethnic, national, or racial groups.

The author makes a series of arguments:

- Human societies are and probably always will be politically split. At the heart of this split lies certain values and thus, the university is inevitably involved in these splits in so far as these values are at stake
- The idea of 'University' is not violated when universities are actively engaged in issues directly related to its own basic values.
- If universities are going to be involved in conflicts that concern its own basic values, why shouldn't it be involved in any political conflict?
- In reality, the neutrality of the university is not related to the desire to 'uphold basic values', but rather, neutrality is imposed simply by the university's own inevitable weakness.
- The universities have always been weak in the sense that it has no means apart from its own intellectual dignity to defend itself against political pressures which, while trying to destroy its neutrality, at the same time attack its impartiality and other basic values.

- A university can be non-neutral and non-impartial at the same time with respect to the same conflict.
- Those who seek to destroy the neutrality of the university seek to destroy its impartiality in teaching and in research and to harness its whole activity to the service of their own interests.
- Political neutrality is needed in the university - not because being non-neutral is incompatible with the fulfilment of the tasks of the university - but because social conditions make their fulfilment incompatible with non-neutrality. This means that the universities are weak and can be easily degraded so they have to maintain the façade of 'political neutrality'.
- The only weapon the university has to defend itself against intimidation and pressure is to proclaim its political neutrality.
- Impartiality is an intrinsic value of the university but neutrality is not. However, neutrality has to be observed because of its causal relation to impartiality. Universities protect its impartiality by claiming neutrality.

Kolakowski argues:

- Universities following the Liberal concept have a much greater chance of upholding their values and do uphold them incomparably better than openly totalitarian ones
- In some circumstance the full political neutrality of the university is impracticable.
- Universities need to remain neutral, but cannot always remain neutral, and there is no absolutely strict definition of the conditions of neutrality.
- The university, as a corporate institution, should take a stance of neutrality toward the competing values of different political or interest groups, social classes, and ethnic, national, or racial groups but should take a stance of non-neutrality toward any infringement of those values that are fundamental to the university and transcend the interest of such groups.

Thus, the author believes that neutrality is possible and, whether justifiable or unjustifiable, it always results from weakness, though that weakness may

not always be blameworthy nor always attributable to the person involved,  
but sometimes attributable to certain peculiarities of our culture.