

1-1-2007

## Politically Incorrect

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### Recommended Citation

Zandieh, Ava (2007) "Politically Incorrect," *ESSAI*: Vol. 5, Article 40.

Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol5/iss1/40>

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Politically Incorrect

by Ava Zandieh

(English 1101)

Don't step on the toes of the dog lovers, the cat lovers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, chiefs, Mormons, Baptists, Unitarians, second-generation Chinese, Swedes, Italians, Germans, Texans, Brooklynites, Irishmen, people from Oregon or Mexico. The people in this book, this play, this TV serial are not meant to represent any actual painters, cartographers, mechanics anywhere. The bigger your market, Montag, the less you handle controversy, remember that (Bradbury 57).

In Ray Bradbury's novel *Fahrenheit 451*, Captain Beatty explains to Montag the importance of pleasing everyone in their society. What Beatty was referring to was the idea of political correctness. Although Bradbury wrote this novel in the fifties, the circumstances that Beatty just described applies to the current wave of PC. The intention of this concept sounds harmless: to eliminate speech or actions that are deemed offensive to others. Yet, just as this idea is used as a tool to control the society in *Fahrenheit 451*, the PC that is used today is just as capable of harm. As displayed in the academic world, PC can act as a detriment to freedom of speech, expression, and thought.

Advocates of PC believe that people should not be able to express themselves in ways that could offend certain people. Because of the need to eliminate certain words and ideas to conform to PC, freedom of speech becomes limited. Many college campuses, for instance, have enforced – or have attempted to enforce – speech codes that reprimand language capable of upsetting minorities, gays, or women (Hentoff 538). In his article, “‘Speech Codes’ on the Campus,” Nat Hentoff wrote of various colleges and universities and the conflicts that arise from the establishment of speech codes. Hentoff found that although speech codes may be liberal-based, the students who are affected are in fact liberal or moderate, while conservative students are the least intimidated (Hentoff 539). This is evident through the many colleges that contain newspapers controlled by conservative students (Hentoff 539). Reflecting on the liberal students affected by the speech codes, Hentoff wrote, “I’ve talked to many of them, and they no longer get involved in class discussions where their views would go against the grain of p.c. righteousness” (Hentoff 540). Some of these views include concerns about affirmative action and abortion (Hentoff 540). By shutting out dialogue concerning potentially unpleasant ideas, speech codes have succeeded in silencing many voices within campuses. Jeff Shesol, a Brown graduate, spoke on liberals who consider others to be racist or sexist if they do not agree with their views. He said, “...I agree with them. I’m against racism and sexism. But these people’s tactics are obscuring the goals. And they’ve resulted in Brown no longer being an open-minded place” (Hentoff 540). Under the constraints of PC, people are almost prohibited to argue from their own viewpoint, increasing the danger of losing their freedom of speech.

Since freedom of speech is deteriorating under PC, it would make sense that freedom of expression is also suffering. Hentoff further explains in his article the increasing threat of PC on expression: “Once speech can be limited in such subjective ways, more and more expression will be included in what is forbidden” (Hentoff 543). College speech codes have not only affected the expression of students, but also of the faculty. Few faculty members have dared to speak out against the speech codes; one who Hentoff spoke to did not even want his name revealed in Hentoff’s article for fear of being called a racist (Hentoff 539). A college president of Yale, Benno Schmidt, willingly

spoke of the affect of speech codes on freedom of expression, stating, “Such a view is wrong in principle and, if extended, is disastrous to freedom of thought. . . these codes are typically enforced by faculty and students who commonly assert that vague notions of community are more important to the academy than freedom of thought and expression. . .” (Hentoff 543). Under PC, the rule that everyone must be satisfied is proved wrong as certain ideas and thoughts are excluded, diminishing the freedom of expression.

The decline of free thought and learning new ideas is another cause of PC as well. One example of this has occurred in a Michigan high school, where Mark Twain’s *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* was eliminated from the school’s curriculum. The high school conducted this action after a black student complained when portions of the novel were read out loud in class (Editorial). Lynette Sutton, assistant superintendent for secondary instruction, commented on the reason for the school’s decision: “We want to be sensitive to how the children feel” (Editorial). Although *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* contains controversial topics such as racism and slavery, Twain wrote it to satirize these same ideas. Banning this influential work of literature as a result of PC robs students of his message against discrimination and racial oppression, therefore robbing them of a different perspective as well.

In conclusion, political correctness may be a promising concept in theory, but it imposes negative outcomes. The repercussions of PC put our rights, freedoms, and values in danger of being eliminated, including the most prized freedom of all: the freedom of speech. In *Fahrenheit 451*, the political correctness movement succeeded in stealing the people’s ability to think and learn for themselves, serving as a perfect example of what could result in PC is abused. To prevent this, people need to respect other ideas that may not be agreeable with their own ethics. Also, it is important to deal with any offensive statements or concepts sensibly. In a debate on speech codes, Gwen Thomas, a community college administrator, provided a statement concerning college students that also applies to anyone: “. . . Our young people have to learn to grow up on college campuses. We have to teach them how to deal with adversarial situations. They have to learn how to survive offensive speech they find wounding and hurtful” (Hentoff 544).

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#### Works Cited

- Bradbury, Ray. *Fahrenheit 451*. New York: The Random House Publishing Group, 1953.  
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