

John Fekete, *Moral Panic: Biopolitics Rising*. Toronto: Robert Davies Publishing, 1994.

Sarah Dunant (ed.), *The War of the Words: The Political Correctness Debate*. London: Virago Press, 1994.

BY Valerie Scatamburlo

JOHN FEKETE

MORAL PANIC

Biopolitics rising



ROBERT DAVIES PUBLISHING

food for thought



The War of the Words

The Political Correctness Debate

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Approximately four years ago, the public could not escape the deluge of articles and editorials warning that a new plague was spreading across university campuses in North America. With dire tales about the hobgoblin of *political correctness*, conservative spokespersons and media cognoscenti managed to paint a picture of campus life resembling Hieronymus Bosch's vision of Hell. Indeed, even casual attention to the mainstream media was enough to discover that our institutions of higher learning had been "taken over" and transformed into hotbeds of radicalism by a sordid alliance of academic dragoons seeking to impose the edicts of political correctness on pliant faculty and students.

Once a phrase used with an ironic subtlety by the Left as a form of self-mockery in the late 1980s and early 1990s, p.c. was appropriated by the conservative Right and turned on its proverbial head. In the process, p.c. was denuded of its historical specificity and subsequently assumed an entourage of defining characteristics, not least of which was an alleged disdain for free expression. In a paradoxical shift, it was claimed that those "radicals" who had once marched for the right to free speech were now vigorously cultivating Orwellian armies of thought police whose mini "ministries of truth" were springing up like noxious weeds on campuses and choking out the flowers of free expression.

"P.c." has by now found a comfortable home in popular parlance, but many of the issues foregrounded during the media brouhaha continue to ferment on university campuses. Indeed, those who feel "threatened" continue to invoke p.c. as a term of derision for all things which could loosely be described as multicultural or feminist, and organizations such as the Society for Academic Freedom and Scholarship have recently launched a vigorous assault on the alleged hegemony of p.c. "forces." The current spate of books and articles drawing attention to pedagogical issues, canon revision, and multiculturalism are further indication that the campus "culture wars" are far from over.

One soldier is John Fekete, whose book *Moral Panic: Biopolitics Rising* has itself caused a panic of sorts. It has been denounced by some and heralded by others. If nothing else, Fekete obviously intended to cause a stir with his publica-

tion — his preface claims that he felt a "calling" to challenge ruling cultural and academic discourses. Despite this proclamation, the pages of Fekete's book are rife with the buzzwords and stock phrases invoked by cultural conservatives south of the border who have, in their "intellectual" forays, used the charge of "political correctness" as a reactionary bludgeon to stifle the voices of critique and dissent.

"The casual sneer at *political correctness*" is, for Fekete, misguided since the academy in particular and Canadian society in general are, he feels, undergoing fundamental transformations due to pressure from various movements. He admonishes that "there is nothing marginal about it." The source of this pressure emanates from the latest affliction allegedly gripping the nation — "biopolitics" — a regressive "anti-politics" defined by Fekete as a form of "primitivism which promotes self-identification through groups defined by categories like race or sex" (22). Arguing that biopolitics is "fast becoming deeply integrated into the central practices of public policy and administration" (25), Fekete claims that this tendency has endangered the very cornerstones of liberal democracy — namely freedom of expression and due process. But this assertion is nothing more than a clever tactic used by Fekete to convince his readers that "biopolitical" warfare is as pervasive as he would have us believe. Furthermore, it conveniently ignores the actual existing hierarchical relations of power and privilege in the academy. Presenting those who have had decades of uninterrupted control over the academy as the "silenced" and the "policed" enables Fekete to disguise their virtual stranglehold on institutionalized power. He fails to grasp the complex character of contemporary contestations over pedagogical initiatives, canon revision, and campus politics; instead, Fekete presents them in typical binary fashion as simple struggles between fair-minded, pro-free speech scholars and censorship-crazed "Stalinist" warriors.

In his first chapter, Fekete begins by surfing through a variety of issues including affirmative action initiatives and the Ontario Ministry of Education Document on "Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity in School Boards" which he refers to as an "ominous directive." The bulk of his

indignant screed, though, is reserved for “biofeminism” and what he calls the “violence-against-women industry.” Hence, almost half of *Moral Panic* is dedicated to debunking the statistics which have been produced about the frequency of violence against women in this country. Fekete’s cannon is aimed particularly at *Changing the Landscape: Achieving Equality – Ending Violence* (the Final Report of the Canadian Panel on Violence Against Women) and Walter DeKeseredy and Katherine Kelly’s 1993 campus abuse study. Fekete contends that these and other similar surveys have generated inflated statistics due to biased categories, political peccadillos, and the “myth” of patriarchal oppression. This, in turn, has created an environment of “moral panic,” heightened women’s anxiety, and “demonized” men.

While one may be inclined to credit Fekete for pointing to the folly of some studies that place leering and rape under the same rubric, what makes *Moral Panic* difficult to digest is its callous trivialization of violence against women. According to Fekete, it is not *actual* violence that has increased in the last decade, only the “rhetoric of violence against women” (147). This however is not intended to suggest that society is without victims, for the crux of Fekete’s argument is that the ascendancy of biofeminism has created a “whole new class of male victims” (27). This rhetoric of male victimization is part of another panic wave currently sweeping North America: white male paranoia.

Having set the ominous context of male victimization, Fekete proceeds to provide a survey of fourteen professors who have been “put on trial” by the coterie of thought police currently headquartered in Canadian universities. Among these “victims” of biopolitical fanaticism reported by Fekete, two in particular stand out for their infamy.

One is Philippe Rushton who, as Fekete reminds us, has received many awards, including a Guggenheim Fellowship, and has penned countless articles and books, including his latest, *Race, Evolution, and Behaviour*, which drew the lead review in *The New York Times Book Review*. (I should add that the eugenicist arguments put forth in Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s *The Bell Curve* also received that same “honour.”) Fekete’s defence of Rushton rests on two premises:

academic freedom and the suggestion that the merit of Rushton’s work can only be judged by “intensive and rigorous scientific scrutiny” (214). This claim lends a scientific aura of credibility to Rushton’s work. Fekete then proceeds to chastise those who have sought to “censor” Rushton’s “scientific” findings. What Fekete conveniently neglects to mention, however, is that Rushton has received

that North American women suffer less from rape than women in “traditional” countries where loss of virginity often spells disqualification from marriage. Victims of date rape, therefore, should demand no more than monetary damages for the “discomfort” they may have felt from unwanted sex. (This view, of course, is strikingly similar to that of Madonna wannabe Camille Paglia, whose message

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monetary support from the right-wing Pioneer Fund — a New York-based organization founded in 1937 — which prides itself on financing research into the dilemmas of “race” betterment and whose directors maintain that black people are “genetically deficient.” In his summary of Rushton’s plight, he almost exclusively relies on an article defending Rushton’s academic freedom written by City College of New York philosophy professor, Barry Gross, the author and editor of such gems as *Discrimination in Reverse* (1978) and *Reverse Discrimination* (1977) — both indictments of affirmative action and equity policies. Gross is also the treasurer of the National Association of Scholars (NAS), an American group largely funded by right-wing think tanks, which has generated most of the anti-p.c. jeremiads in the American academy. Hence, in the name of defending Rushton’s academic freedom, Fekete fails to address Rushton’s links to right-wing organizations whose agendas are explicitly political and far removed from any commitment to the liberal democratic principles Fekete claims to valorize.

Another well-known and contentious case reviewed is that of beleaguered University of New Brunswick mathematics professor, Matin Yaqzan, who was thrust into the national (and international) spotlight for comments published in the student newspaper *The Brunswickian*. Yaqzan had stated that date rape is often a manifestation of young men’s natural and uncontrollable sexual urges and suggested

to rape victims is to just “go with it girl.”)

Fekete argues that Yaqzan’s position is not too far afield from feminists who maintain that men are inherently aggressive. The main difference between them, according to Fekete, is that Yaqzan refuses to be outraged about date rape and hence clashes at the “deepest levels” with the Orwellian program of biofeminism. While he concedes that Yaqzan’s opinion is “not a perfect viewpoint,” Fekete claims that it is not “outside the orbit of human understanding” (251).

In his defence of Rushton, Yaqzan, and others, Fekete grounds his argument on the sacred tenet of free speech — a principle which, as Stanley Fish reminds us (in *There’s No Such Thing as Free Speech . . . and It’s a Good Thing Too* [1994]), is never an absolute, but rather a political prize, a name given to verbal

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behaviour that serves particular agendas at particular moments in history. Fekete however, fails to acknowledge this and thus falls prey to a now-common trap: forgetting that if the freedom of speech of the Rushtons and Yaqzans is to be defended, so too must the voices of their critics. Much of what Fekete calls "censorship" is actually protest and dissent. It is the "free speech" of those people whom Fekete and company do not want to hear. Nonetheless, given the contemporary social and cultural climate, characterized as it is by a backlash mentality, Fekete and his comrades can position themselves as paragons of liberty and defenders of free speech against the intrusive, barbaric forces of the "other," as George Bush did in his infamous anti-p.c. tirade delivered at the University of Michigan in 1991.

Another case, less publicized, is that of Jacques Collin, a University of Manitoba professor, disciplined and punished for using sexist and racist language and slapping a student "whom he was trying to stimulate to brighter attention" (221). Fekete justifies Collin's behaviour by referring to his pedagogical style as "flamboyant" and "theatrical" and, it seems, because the 66-year-old scholar and teaching award nominee had given "30 years' service" to the academy. In fact, making reference to "years of service" as if he were discussing embattled war heroes is a recurring theme in Fekete's assessments. Indeed, Fekete's outrage at the alleged injustices suffered by various professors, when not appealing to freedom of speech, rest largely on an unstated premise that, perhaps inadvertently, suggests that such upstanding, "tenured" faculty are beyond reproach.

The latter portion of *Moral Panic* is reserved for three cases, which were unresolved at the time of publication. The most striking aspect of this section is not so much the circumstances of the cases but rather the way in which Fekete frames them. Repeatedly, the male "victims" in question are referred to with glowing epithets and described as outstanding educators, brilliant scholars, and defenders of freedom and liberty, while the biofeminists are depicted as snivelling, imma-

ture, intellectually deficient "warriors." As any astute critic knows, the effort to construct an enemy within always necessitates demonizing the dissidents first, and demonizing is Fekete's forte. After readers are provided with a description of University of Victoria professor Warren Magnusson's "sterling credentials" and "flawless reputation," we are informed that he too had become a target of "biofeminist fundamentalism." The source of contestation between Magnusson and the biofeminists was the circulation of Magnusson's document *Feminism, McCarthyism and Sexual Fundamentalism*. Without elaborating the details and circumstances of the case which Fekete describes, one could easily argue that the very title of Magnusson's document is disingenuous and misleading, but this issue remains unaddressed in Fekete's analysis. One cannot deny that there have been some foolish and obdurate demands for "politically correct" language and behaviour in recent years, but only a serious bout of historical amnesia would enable one to equate the current situation on campuses with the McCarthyite tactics of a previous generation. Despite Fekete's reputation as a "Leftist," and aside from his avowed concern for the future of the academy, *Moral Panic*, rather than constructively contributing to ongoing debates and issues, merely fuels the fire of the "backlash" already burning on campuses and in Canadian culture at large.

The collection of essays that constitute *The War of the Words: The Political Correctness Debate*, offers a much more balanced overview than *Moral Panic* of contemporary contestations about gender, race, sexual politics and canon revision. For those already familiar with the onslaught of recently published books on political correctness, the contributions in this volume, with the possible exception of Stuart Hall's treatise on the topic, offer little that is novel in the interpretation of issues raised by political correctness. For the uninitiated, however, *The War of the Words* provides an adequate introduction to a range of views that both laud and critique p.c. politics.

Despite the fact that the collection was published in Britain, many of the essays address the current state of affairs on American campuses. This is perhaps why many of the essays exhibit glaring limitations. John Annette's "The Culture War and the Politics of Higher Education in America" and Yasmin Alibhai-Brown's "The Great Backlash" both rightly point out that the media and conservative pundits have drastically overstated their case by exaggerating the extent to which the Left had "taken over" U.S. campuses. They also expose the fact that the stupefying use of McCarthyite rhetoric has distorted the account which most citizens have received about campus relations. Indeed, today's opponents of the "new McCarthyism" often claim that the 1950s situation has been turned on its head — that today "tenured radicals" quash dissent by campus conservatives. However, the alleged p.c. McCarthyites wield nowhere near the institutional clout that conservative critics charge.

The problem with Annette's account, however, is the suggestion that the anti-p.c. campaign suddenly burst onto the scene in the late '80s and early '90s in response to Leftist overtures in college classrooms. In addition, he wrongly claims that the anti-p.c. sounding board the National Association of Scholars (which, incidentally, has chapters in Canada) was established in 1987. While it is true that the NAS membership grew by leaps and bounds in the early 1990s, the origin of the NAS dates back to 1982, when it was called the Campus Coalition for Democracy. In fact, the groundwork for the right-wing backlash was being laid in the late '70s and early '80s by a number of corporate-funded think tanks and foundations. Thus, the attack on p.c. was not a spontaneous insurrection, but rather part of a long-term, well-financed plan by the new Right. The early 1990s simply provided the most opportune time to push the anti-p.c. rhetoric into mainstream popular consciousness, given that most Americans were still strangling themselves with yellow ribbons, revelling in patriotic self-congratulations for the "victory" in the Gulf and drowning in a sea of new world order jingoism.

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While political correctness has mainly been a target of the Right, it has also raised the ire of some Leftist intellectuals, many of whom have argued that p.c. represents a discursive withdrawal from politics. More concerned with esoteric changes to language than with substantive shifts in power relations, these Leftists have accused p.c. advocates of retreating into an endless array of language games. In her essay, sociolinguist Deborah Cameron seeks to challenge this assertion by focussing on the "power of language." She argues that the various discursive changes engendered by p.c. politics are welcome and necessary developments.

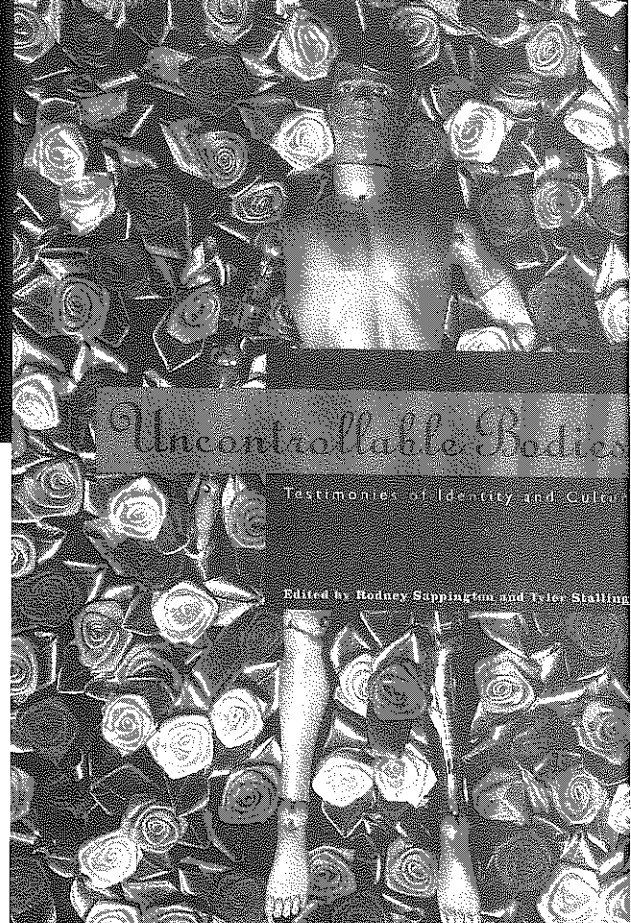
In the concluding essay, Stuart Hall argues that p.c. reflects the fragmentation of the political landscape and the breakup of social constituencies that no longer adhere to collective master narratives such as those built upon class and/or labour. In this regard, Hall views p.c. as the inevitable result of the rise of identity politics. Hall also points out that the discursive and individualist notions encapsulated in p.c. politics are symptomatic of a larger intellectual culture that has undergone "the linguistic turn." Without discounting the political relevance of language, Hall maintains that many champions of discursive change are guilty of clinging to the "belief that if things are called by a different name they will cease to exist" (186). Therefore, against the claims of some who view alterations in language as progressive in and of themselves, Hall argues that such positions are decidedly limited in their ability to address broader social relations of power, exclusion, and marginalization. In the attempt to suggest some "politically incorrect" pathways through the maze of p.c. politics, Hall states that unless p.c. is coupled with a strategy which is democratic — in the sense that it genuinely addresses the real fears, confusions, and anxieties as well as the pleasures of ordinary people, tries to educate them to new conceptions of life, to win them over and thus to constitute majorities where there are now only fragmented minorities — it is destined to fail in the long run, whatever its little local successes (177).

Rodney Sappington and Tyler Stallings (eds.), *Uncontrollable Bodies: Testimonies of Identity and Culture*. Seattle: Bay Press, 1994.

BY Gordon Brent Ingram

These are the times when we are increasingly expected to have healthy, perfect bodies, even as we resist the imaging they produce. This contradiction, between the body as armour and commodity and the growing discomfort that many feel about this, is the subject of *Uncontrollable Bodies*. Lesbian-owned Bay Press of Seattle has produced yet another disturbing anthology in a series that engages topics such as AIDS activism ("AIDS demo graphics"), violence against women, and terrorism. Editors Sappington and Stallings introduce "testimonies" with the vision of the body as "a site of physical and psychological trauma, institutional control, and enforced sexual norms and practices" (11). These, however, are not stodgy discourses on sexual politics; they are personal narratives where the boundaries between story and interpretation break down.

These sixteen testimonies to personal, emotional, and erotic anxiety are impactful. Most are more than a bit disturbing. The authors obviously get off on making themselves into what Stallings calls "spectacle." There are sudden vascillations in most of the pieces between postmodern psycho-babble and raunchy rap. But *Uncontrollable Bodies* is not about gratuitous dirty talk (though when it does occur it often creates oases of directness in murky monologues). Robert Flynt's homoerotic photographs of men together, seemingly underwater, set the stage for the collection's miasmas and dreams. New York-based AIDS activist and video artist Gregg Bordowitz, who recently showed his work and gave a workshop at Vancouver's Video In, tells a powerful story about his willingness to engage in unsafe sex: "I wanted him to fuck me without a condom. I received his cum as a gift. I wished for a legacy that I could receive in



I can remember thinking that my father's having his penis on the outside of his body was another sign of his vulnerability, his fragility

Lynne (age eight or nine): Aren't you afraid you're going to break it?

Daddy: What?

Lynne: Your penis . . .

Daddy collapses on the couch, laughing.