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Preview: As readers of Profscam and The Hollow Men will know, Charles Sykes has devoted the last several years to investigating firsthand what actually goes on at American colleges and universities. In this Imprimis issue, adapted from his forthcoming book, A Nation of Victims (available in September from St. Martin's Press), he argues that it is not merely political correctness, but "the politics of sensitivity" that has overtaken higher education. Mr. Sykes participated in Hillsdale's Center for Constructive Alternatives February 1992 seminar, "Thought Police on Campus: Is Academic Freedom in Danger?" I

hen *Newsweek* magazine reported on what it called the new "Thought Police" on America's university campuses, it described academia's new rage—"political correctness"—as "strictly speaking, a totalitarian philosophy." Nothing escaped its attention; nothing was too trivial for its ministrations; no one was

Wimmune. From the reading lists peppered with ideologically approved Third World writers to a disciplinary apparatus poised to stamp out the slightest offense to the sensibilities of designated political and ethnic groups, campus opinion was smothered in a paternalism that would have been the envy of any college chaplain of the 19th century. Struggling to place all of this in some sort of historical and philosophical context, *Newsweek* reported that politically, "PC is Marxist in origin, in the broad sense of attempting to redistribute power from the privileged class (white males) to the oppressed masses." But even as the magazine sought to trace PC's lineage, the inadequacy of categories of political philosophy was obvious.

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"The Ideology of Sensitivity" by Charles Sykes, Author, Profscam



claustrophobic atmosphere of campus life often seems less like Big Brother than *Big Nanny*. The focus of *Big Nanny*, after all, is on "sensitivity," which is not a political term at all, nor one that is terribly helpful in sorting out the relationships of various economic classes.

Instead, "sensitivity" is a transplant from the world of culture and psychology, in which taste, feelings and emotions are paramount.

Political correctness turns out to be a form of the larger transformation of society reflected in ascendancy of psychological over political terminology. What began as the attempt to politi-

cize psychology (and psychologize politics) had led to the swallowing of each by the other and the emergence of a new form of therapeutic politics.

I should clarify here what I mean by the therapeutic culture. In general, the term refers to the psychologization of modern life profiting therapists, support groups, and new ailments du jour. But it has a larger implication as well: the substitution of medical standards and terminology for what had traditionally been moral, ethical and religious questions. As a society we have grown far more comfortable with saying someone is sick than with saying they have done evil.

Therapeutic politics is an equally radical departure. While it remains ostensibly concerned with moral issues, it does not primarily concern itself with what is just or unjust; or even with whether something is true or untrue. These considerations are not irrelevant. But they are overshadowed by concern over "self-esteem" and "feelings." In the therapeutic culture, all of us are trembling on the verge of confusion and anxiety. But for the politics of victimization, the new ethos has been a windfall. Psychic frailty has replaced class as the focus of a new politics.

Armed with the new political/therapeutic categories and heirs to four decades of the endless elaboration of grievance and psychological fragility, victims could be transformed from capable citizens in need of fundamental legal

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rights into frail psychological growths, easily blighted by the slightest gesture, facial expression, or word that they might find uncongenial. Consider this: If the distinctive format of traditional liberal education was the patriarchal and phallogocentric Socratic dialogue, the model for the new order is the therapeutic workshop and consciousness-raising session. Such approaches do not seek debate or a reasoned balancing of rights, but an embracing of victims, often accompanied by the coached acknowledgment of guilt.

The results, predictably, have been dramatic.

Once "feelings" are established as the barometer of acceptable behavior, speech (and by extension, thought) becomes only as free as the most sensitive group on campus will permit. One of the central dogmas of the new victimist politics is that only members of a victim group are able to understand their own suffering.

Some postmodern political theorists, including Harvard's Judith Shklar, argue that traditional conceptions of justice are inadequate because they fail to take into account "the victim's version." Shklar argues that "the sense of injustice should assume a renewed importance" in political thinking, "for it is both unfair to ignore personal resentment and imprudent to overlook the political anger in which it finds its expression."

But at its extreme, this view turns injustice into a subjective experience and denies the validity of objective and shared understandings of equity and justice to which victim and non-victim can appeal. Abolishing such norms makes contentious issues irresolvable, as each group is trapped within its own experience and sense of grievance. Not only does this accelerate the balkanization of ethnic groups, it also creates a protective barrier that hermetically seals off one group from another.

Because only a victim could really understand their plight, any criticism or questioning from non-victims is rejected out-of-hand as an act of disrespect and (of course) insensitivity. One direct product was what Bard College

Charles J. Sykes' best-selling book, *Profscam: Professors and the Demise of Higher Education* (Regnery Gateway, 1988), won critical praise from the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Mr. Sykes followed up with a second volume, *The Hollow Men: Politics and Corruption in Higher Education* (Regnery Gateway) in 1990. He has also co-edited *The National Review College Guide* (National Review Books, 1991) and is editor of *WI: Wisconsin Interest*. He is currently a senior fellow of the Wisconsin Policy Research Institute.

President Leon Botstein would call the "culture of forbidden questions."

The fear of hurt has trumped the search for truth.

This is not to suggest, however, that all of the concern is misplaced. In particular, the anxiety of minority students is very real. Any student going to college in a strange town, facing unknown challenges, is prey to feelings of self-doubt, loneliness, fear and confusion. Minority students are no different, except that they face even greater pressures. Many of them tend to suffer from feelings of exclusion or "competitive rejection" when they arrive on campus, and many of them experience considerable anxiety over the quality of their academic preparation.

As colleges and universities have escalated affirmative action programs, their dilemma has been compounded. While denying that they are practicing favoritism, elite schools have in fact admitted minority students with substantially lower test scores than their white counterparts. For many of those eagerly courted minority students—who have been repeatedly assured that they have been admitted strictly on their merits—the reality of academic life often comes as a cruel shock. Roughly two-thirds of black students who enter higher education eventually drop out before graduating.

Because it is politically impossible for the institutions of higher learning to acknowledge their racial sleight of hand—and thus confront the educational inequities among their students honestly and openly—many have turned instead to symbolic politics. It is easier to "celebrate diversity" than to admit that their school's academic standards have been bent; it is easier to blame "racism" than to reallocate scarce resources. Dinesh D'Souza describes the process: "Eager to prevent minority frustration and anger from directing itself at the president's or dean's office, the administration hotly denies the reality of preferential treatment and affirms minority students in their conviction that the real enemy is latent bigotry that every-where conspires to thwart campus diversity. As the Harvard political scientist Harvey Mansfield puts it, 'White students must admit their guilt so that minority students do not have to admit their incapacity.— This is the climate for the sensitivity revolution.

Mum's the Word

4 "Sympathy," remarks essayist Pico Iyer, "cannot be legislated any more than kindness can." Iyer obviously will never be a college president. Universities and colleges have rushed to create new bureaucracies to "protect" and shield victims from further victimization—whether it be an Indian symbol at Dartmouth College, a student who

sings "We Shall Overcome" in a "sarcastic" manner at Southern Methodist University, or expressions of such proscribed attitudes as "ageism" ("oppression of the young and old by young adults and the middle aged"), "ableism" ("oppression of the differently abled by the temporarily abled"), and "lookism" (the "construction of a standard of beauty/attractiveness") at Smith College.

"Psychic frailty has replaced class as the focus of a new politics."

The University of Arizona has taken a similarly expansive view of sensitivity. Its "Diversity of Action Plan" expresses concern over discrimination against students on the basis of "age, color, ethnicity, gender, physical and mental ability, race, religion, sexual orientation, Vietnam-era veteran status, socioeconomic background, or individual style." When John Leo, a columnist for *U.S. News & World Report*, tried to find out just what the university meant by "individual style," he reported that "diversity specialist" Connie Gajewski explained that this category would include nerds and people who dress differently. "We didn't want to leave anyone out," she said. Indeed.

Not to be outdone in their zeal, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee officials have handed out a list of 49 "Ways to Experience Diversity," which urges students to "Hold hands publicly with someone of a different race or someone of the same sex as you" and to "Go to a toy store and investigate the availability of racially diverse dolls."

The University of Connecticut has banned "inappropriately directed laughter"; Duke University's president has appointed a watchdog committee to search out "disrespectful facial expressions or body language aimed at black students"; while Smith College's malediction upon "heterosexism" includes the crime of "not acknowledging their [gays] existence."

Even that citadel of tradition William & Mary has succumbed to the mood of the times. The alma mater of Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe has issued guidelines to nonsexist language insisting that terms such as "kingpin" be changed to "key person."

At Harvard, sensitive professors at a re-education seminar have joined in a chorus of therapeutic concern for the sensibilities of their students. One professor has argued that faculty members should never "introduce any sort of thing that might hurt a group." He recognized the implications of his comments for a professor's freedom to teach, but "the pain that racial

insensitivity can create is more important," he insists, "than a professor's academic freedom." Or, he could have added, a student's.

At the University of Michigan, students have faced discipline for suggesting that women are not as qualified as men in any given field; one student was actually brought up on charges of sexual harassment for suggesting that he could develop "a counseling plan for helping gays become straight."

Officials at New York University Law School recently bowed to pressure and cancelled a moot court hearing on the question of custody rights for lesbians, after PC cadres complained that "Writing arguments [against the right of

lesbians to win custody] is hurtful to a group of people and this is hurtful to all of us."

At times, this new paternalism has gratuitously extended the status of victimhood to individuals who feel they are doing quite all right without being liberated or otherwise protected. At the University of Minnesota, for example, cheerleaders have been banned from performing at UM games on the grounds that it fosters "sexual stereotypes" demeaning to the dancers. Said one of the cheerleaders: "We feel we're intelligent enough to know when we're considered objects." The sensitivity police did not agree in their conviction that the real enemy is latent bigotry that everywhere con-

spires to thwart campus diversity.

In part, this shift from substance to form can be traced to the civil rights movement's shift in emphasis from combatting discrimination to fighting "racism." Although apparently a subtle shift in nomenclature, the new focus on racism abolished the distinction between private and public acts and between conduct and attitudes. It meant, according to Julius Lester, "in effect, that the opinions, feelings, and prejudices of private individuals were a legitimate target of political action. This was dangerous in the extreme, because such a formulation is merely a new statement of totalitarianism, the effort to control not only the

behavior of citizens, but the thoughts and feelings of persons." But the shift in civil rights cannot fully account for the new politics of "sensitivity" and the metastasis of offended groups. For that we need to look to a broader cultural shift.

Ego Uber Alles: Self Over All

On one level, the push for sensitivity is little more than the age-old fight for human dignity, the demand that all individuals be treated with respect and rational sympathy. To be against sensitivity is thus to risk being against good manners or hostile to an attitude of "caring." The opposite of sensitivity, after all, is boorishness. So the arguments in favor of "sensitivity" have moral weight and they deserve to be taken seriously. But it is the nature—and the tragedy—of victim-ism to take legitimate concerns and distort them for self-indulgent ends.

The victimist distortion of "sensitivity" is the insistence that it is not enough to behave correctly—one must be attuned to the feelings of others, and adapt oneself to the kaleidoscopic shades of grievance, injury and ego that make up the subjective sensibilities of the "victim." The relationship between individuals and groups is not mediated by mutual respect or principles of justice, but must now be recast solely in therapeutic terms—the avoidance of injury and offense, the need to sacrifice for the self-esteem of the other. Superficially, this resembles Christian charity, but as a series of demands and mandatory obeisances it is something else altogether.

The essence of naked egotism is imposing one's likes and dislikes and the subtle prejudices and whining annoyances of the self on others. Society exists to put limits on the desire of the ego to make itself the center of the universe; and maturity could once be defined as the child's gradual recognition that his or her emotions, demands and sensitivities are no longer absolute.

"Sensitivity," however, (and please note the quotation marks here) transforms the self—especially the aggrieved self—into the imperial arbiter of behavior. Everyone now must accommodate themselves to the sensitivities of the self, whose power is based not on force or even shared ideology, but on change-able and perhaps arbitrary and exaggerated "feelings." This is the historic (if not logical) culmination of the development of inner-directed man into anxiety-ridden other-directed man and later into psychological man. David Riesman had written that inner-directed man had relied on an internal gyroscope, other-directed man had taken his lead from emotional radar. But the mechanistic metaphors

are now obsolete. Sensitive man is neither a gyroscope nor a radar. He is a raw nerve, frequently inflamed.

Big Nanny Is Watching

Despite its psychological pedigree, "sensitivity" has proven to be a powerful political weapon. By redefining ideology in non-ideological terms, it has provided a pretext for sweeping changes in American universities, but also in the larger society, by radically changing the standards of equity and evidence. Here again, Brown University has set the pace. All minority students have been assigned to the school's Third World Transition Program (a rather eccentric name for a program designed for black students from New Jersey). In a description of the program, journalist Pete Hamill notes that "It is race-driven; it assumes that non-whites are indeed different from other Americans, mere bundles of pathologies, permanent residents in the society of victims, and therefore require special help. 'They're made to feel separate from the first day they arrive,' and 'they stay separate for the next four years.'"

In this atmosphere the scope of victim-protections goes far beyond simply punishing undergraduates who yell "nigger" in the dormitory. Few schools have so eagerly embraced the metaphysics of victimism and the therapeutic ethos of stamping out "insensitivity" as has Brown, which has hired sensitivity "experts" and consultants to minister to the prejudices of its unenlightened undergraduates.

One consultant hired by Brown is Donald Kao, who openly acknowledges that his goal is to convince his audience that America is a racist society in which "privileged" whites have established arbitrary norms of acceptable behavior. Nor is his goal merely to encourage tolerance. Kao's "standard of gauging one's behavior" is far more demanding. "If you are feeling comfortable or normal," he insists, "then you are probably oppressing someone, whether that person is a woman or a gay or whatever. We probably won't rid our society of racism until everyone strives to be abnormal."

Having acculturated minorities to their oppressed status, Brown insists on preternatural alertness for signs of racism—which, by definition, is everywhere. "It is both subtle and overt," a university publication announces. "Racism is encountered through our language, actions, non-verbal communications, institutions, access to privilege and educational processes." No one at Brown, it declares, is "immune." But, like guilt, potential victimhood is also an equal opportunity affair. Individuals are protected against slurs on the basis of such characteristics as "race, religion, gender, handicap, economic status, sexual ori-

entation, ethnicity, national origin, or on the basis of position or function." (It is unclear whether the ban on ridicule "on the basis of position or function" applies to jokes about "dumb jocks" or rich frat boys.)

Significantly, Brown's policy has not been framed as a ban on improper activity; it is cast in the form of a right of victims "to live in an environment free from harassment." The importance of this distinction lies in the fact that the right to be free of "harassment" can be enforced even when there is no intent to harass or demean. Banned activities include, "inappropriate verbal attention, name calling, using racial/ethnic epithets, vandalism and pranks." More explicitly, students are warned: "If the purpose of your behavior, language, or gesture is to harass, harm, *cause psychological stress or make someone the focus of your joke, you are engaged in a harassing manner. It may be intentional or unintentional and still constitute harassment.*" [Emphasis added.]

It is not, I think, an exercise in over-scrupulous legalism to point out the inherent contradictions in that statement. In one sentence harassment is described as the *purposeful* infliction of harm ("If the purpose of your behavior...is to...cause..."): but the very next sentence renders it meaningless by declaring that even "unintentional" acts may constitute harassment as well.

Brown's administrators have unintentionally but graphically revealed the slippery nature of such policies and the near-impossibility of crafting equitable policies that are grounded on purely subjective judgments. This becomes even more pointed when Brown describes the "effects" of harassment in purely therapeutic terms. In almost every case the alleged damage is purely subjective—a matter of "feelings" and impressions—rather than a matter of actual or demonstrable harm. The listed effects include: "Loss of self-esteem"; "a vague sense of danger" (rather than actual danger); "a feeling that one's personal security and dignity have been undermined"; "denial of opportunity, privilege or right"; "feelings of impotence, anger and disenfranchisement"; "withdrawal"; "fear"; "anxiety"; "depression"; "a sense of embarrassment from being ridiculed." Almost by definition there is little or no defense to a charge of such harassment. If the victim insists that he or she experienced "anxiety" or "embarrassment" because of something someone said, proof is beside the point. Lack of intention is no defense. Sensitivity demands belief.

In the late 1980s, the University of Michigan adopted a sweeping "speech code" aimed at wiping out racist, sexist, homophobic, and ethnocentric slurs. Students were warned that they could be suspended or expelled for any act "verbal or physical, that stigmatizes or

victimizes an individual on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, sex, sexual orientation, creed, national origin, ancestry, age, marital status, handicap, or Vietnam-era veteran status." Because the policy was so broad—and vague—it raised the obvious question of how it would be enforced. How would students know exactly what stigmatized someone on the basis of, say, "Vietnam-era status" or "ancestry"? Most important of all, what sort of proof would be needed? The university's answer was direct: None. (It also raised questions of how it could be reconciled with the First Amendment. A federal judge later invalidated the policy.)

In March 1990 a black student at Emory University reported that she had been the object of a campaign of racial harassment. The nineteen-year-old freshman reported that her room had been ransacked, racial slurs written on the walls, and said that she had received death threats. Her allegations received national media attention after she reportedly curled up in the fetal position and refused to speak.

Emory's president—the episode clearly on his mind—penned an article for *The New York Times* denouncing "renascent bigotry," and using the incident as a justification for his schools' sweeping ban on any "conduct (oral,

all the pressure these black students are under at these predominantly white schools. If this will highlight it, if it will bring it to the attention of the public, I have no problem with that."

At Emory, the metaphysics of victimization finally transcended the mundane world of reality and fact.

But if "sensitivity" demanded belief, it also demanded the opposite, depending on the racial or gender identity of the perpetrator. It turns out that insensitivity is not always insensitivity; and only someone with a reliable and up-to-date political scorecard can tell for sure.

Gayatri Spivak, a professor of English and cultural studies at the University of Pittsburgh, argued, for example, that it is unreasonable to expect minorities to practice the sort of tolerance demanded of white students. "Tolerance is a loaded virtue," he explained, "because you have to have a base of power to practice it. You cannot ask a certain people to 'tolerate' a culture that has historically ignored them at the same time their children are indoctrinated into it." His position was echoed by a group of professors at the University of Michigan who declared: "Behavior which constitutes racist oppression when engaged in by whites does not have this character when undertaken by people of color."

Similarly, one of the authors of Stanford's speech code argued that its ban on offensive language would not apply to black students. By definition, they were incapable of "insensitivity." In the same way that the guilt of whites as universal racists was simply assumed, the innocence of blacks was axiomatic.

"The politicized culture of victimization often confuses mere difference with inequity and oppression, while common sense reminds that difference is, well, often just being different."

"Experience at the university," a university publication explained, "has been that *people almost never make false complaints about discrimination*." [Emphasis added.] That specifically included any alleged incident for which there were no witnesses, the school said. If it was one student's word against another's, the accused was presumed guilty. Michigan's policy did more than simply invert normal standards that require accusers to shoulder the burden of proof. It enshrined the doctrine that issues of victimism could and should be judged on radically new terms—further breaking down the distinction between fact *and* fabrication.

written, graphic or physical) directed against any person or group. ..that has the purpose or reasonably foreseeable effect of creating an offensive, demeaning, intimidating, or hostile environment."

But the episode of "renascent bigotry" never happened.

After investigating the allegations, officials determined the episode was an elaborate hoax on the student's part, designed to divert attention from her alleged cheating on a chemistry test. When asked for his reaction, however, the head of the Atlanta NAACP said: "It doesn't matter...whether she did it or not, because of

Specify format:

According to Professor Robert Rabin, whites did not need any protection from abusive language because they did not have a history of being discriminated against. Only those who have been victims of oppression needed to be shielded from offensive words, he said. Calling a white a "honky" is not the same as calling a black a "nigger." This was essentially the same argument advanced by Stanford Law Professor Mari Matsuda in a 1989 law review article in which she argued for anti-racist speech bans because freedom of speech should be understood as an instrument to help members of powerless groups. The emphasis on group rather than individual rights is crucial because it locates constitutional protections not in one's citizenship, but in one's status on the victim hierarchy. Under Matsuda's doctrine, critic David Rieff noted, "a rich woman would presumably be protected by the First Amendment but a poor white man (unless gay, or disabled, or otherwise 'disenfranchised') would not."

As interpreted in the light of victimist politics, the Stanford policy embodied what Nat Hentoff called a "new sliding scale of permissible expression" that was completely dependent on comparative victimhood. Given their history of oppression, Hentoff wondered, shouldn't Native Americans get even more protection than blacks? Was a slur against an Italian-American to be punished more harshly than being offensive to a Presbyterian? Given the history of anti-Semitism, Hentoff wondered whether Jews would "get special leniency when

they insult members of other religions?"

The question was not entirely frivolous.

Once status was determined by the degree of one's victimhood, every nuance of oppression became crucial—one's rights now depended on the constantly shifting scorecard of grievement. This is not a trivial distinction; there is a vast difference between basing rights upon respect and linking rights to personal inadequacy.

Restoring Common Sense

This is a distinction that most Americans can understand. And this brings us to the fourth and final point in our attack on the politics of victimization: Common sense. It is always a mistake to underestimate the reservoirs of good sense that have survived the various attacks of political, cultural and therapeutic elites. Simple native good sense has already experienced a modest comeback of sorts on college campuses, where the more lugubrious and heavy-handed aspects of political correctness have foundered on their own absurdity.

Common sense can certainly go a long way toward making distinctions between a bungled pass and an act of rape; between greed and "compulsive shopping syndrome"; between victims of racial discrimination and victims of "motorism," or "sizeism"; between the genuinely handicapped and the "chroni-

cally late"; and between bad luck and acts of social victimization.

In short, Americans need to *lighten up*.

The politicized culture of victimization often confuses mere difference with inequity and oppression, while common sense reminds that difference is, well, often just being different. Most of us can tell the difference between making a mistake and being victimized; between excelling and oppressing someone. All of us experience unfairness and injustice, but that does not mean we need to turn them into all-purpose alibis.

Most important of all, our common sense and the human tradition it reflects reminds us that we are all fallible, all beset with human foibles and limitations. At some level of our being, we all know that something is required of us, however much we may try to shake it off. Instinctively and rationally we know our responsibilities; we know that we are not sick when we are merely weak; we know that others are not to blame when we have erred; we know that the world does not exist to make us happy.

At the end of one of his novels, Saul Bellow has his character Arthur Sammler, survivor of the concentration camps and eternal witness to the follies of his fellow man, sum up the life of a dead friend by declaring that in the end, "he did meet the terms of his contract. The terms which, in his innermost heart each man knows. As I know mine. As all know. For that is the truth of it—that we all know, God, that we know, we know, we know" 8

IMPRIMIS (im'-pri-mes), taking its **name** from the Latin term, "in the first place," is the publication of Hillsdale College. **Executive Editor**, Ronald L. Trowbridge; **Managing Editor**, Lissa Roche; Assistant, Patricia A. DuBois. Illustrations by Tom Curtis. The opinions **expressed** in IMPRIMIS **may be**, but are not necessarily, the **views** of Hillsdale College and its **External Programs** division. Copyright ©1992. Permission to reprint in whole or part is **hereby granted, provided** a version of the following credit line is used: "**Reprinted** by permission from IMPRIMIS, the monthly journal of Hillsdale College." **Subscription free upon request. ISSN 0277-8432. Circulation 385,000 worldwide, established 1972.** IMPRIMIS **trademark registered** in U.S. Patent and Trade Office #1563325.