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# Little Red Herrings — Roosting Chickens?

by **Mark Y. Herring** (Dean of Library Services, Dacus Library, Winthrop University) <herringm@winthrop.edu>

About three decades ago, political correctness surfaced in a few large colleges and universities. Some attributed it to a form of Marxism, others brushed it off as a passing fad. Still others marked it as a step in the right direction: looking out for others who might otherwise be offended by one thing or another. Political correctness, PC as it was sometimes abbreviated, took many forms, from language to cultures, to mores. For example, some women took offense to having doors opened for them, literally. Some didn't like certain words or phrases being used in their presence. Still others sought to change language from the inside out, doing away with gender specific antecedents, and making speaking and writing more of a challenge than it already is.

On the balance, at least early on, it did seem that there might well be something to be learned from those arguing in favor of political correctness. Well-meaning individuals sought to think more about others and less about themselves, at least in certain contexts. For example, anti-bias curricula sprang up in many K-12 schools, with some taking great pains to be sure even mathematical word problems did not lean in a sexist, racist or cultural-preference direction. Had political correctness stopped right there, it might not have upset anyone other than those on the very, very far right.

Soon, however, the political correctness began to have fairly pejorative connotations as the movement sought to undo just about everything, from syntax, science, and, be honest, sensibility. Newspapers, especially the *New York Times*, began crusading about not using certain kinds of references and all too soon, as is the case with many formidable movements, those not using politically correct terminology had to be sidelined or disenfranchised. Let's face it, political correctness never corrected with an even hand. While we were instructed to think of God as a woman, we were never instructed to think of Satan as anything other than a man.

A backlash occurred, of course, and amid right-thinking criticism and overreach, political correctness seemed to vanish. As it turns out, it merely went into hiding.

Today the term is rarely used, but its effects, especially on colleges and universities, now appear to be the proverbial chickens coming home to roost. It began about a year ago with so-called "trigger warnings." Trigger warnings are anything that might cause someone to have an unpleasant emotional reaction, either because it reminds them of an

unpleasant past moment in life, or it might remind them of an unpleasant moment that may happen later. *Anything* is the operative word. Again, the evolution may have begun from right-thinking motives — no one really seeks to hurt another's feelings, at least not intentionally, save for the Schadenfreuder among us. On the other hand, it's good mental health to face your fears and your own unpleasantness even if it is the result of another, isn't it?

From trigger warnings we have now come to a state wherein many college and university students claim emotional well-being and so must be protected from words, ideas, phrases, concepts and terms in literature, social science, and general commerce they don't like. As **Greg Lukianoff** and **Jonathan Haidt** put it in a recent *Atlantic* article, we have entered "the coddling of the American mind." Is this too harsh or simply the opinion of two unfeeling men? Hardly.

Some comedians like **Jerry Seinfeld** complain that college students can't take a joke so he, and others, such as **Chris Rock** and **Tina Fey**, no longer run the college circuit comedy route. Young people, they argue, can no longer take a joke. Professors are now terrified about holding class discussions for fear they will say a word, bring up an idea, or enter into a debate that will land them, first in Human Resources, and second, in the unemployment lines. Students at one college in Pennsylvania want to change the name of its center, named after a former president from the Depression who essentially saved the college from extinction, because his last name has a deadly connotation. It would be like someone complaining about "Herring" because they object to fish. My older daughter's married name is Slaughter. Oh, dear.

So-called "safe zones" have become safe zones from anything and everything that might cause someone the least bit of emotional distress. While much of this is occurring at mainly large institutions, it is occurring everywhere, at right-leaning, left-leaning, Christian, secular, public and private institutions. We must all walk on egg shells now because there are those among us who are on the brink of breaking, literally.

I find all of this not only very puzzling but also more than a little alarming. Saying something simple and, at one time, consid-

ered common sense can land you in deep and serious trouble. For example, making a case that the best qualified client should get the job, can make you come off sounding elitist at a bare minimum. Resorting to statistics to prove a point can make you seem arrogant or unfeeling, not accounting for those of us who fall outside the Bell Curve's upper 2% tail. Saying that people should be responsible for their own choices can give the impression that you do not care for them, think you're better than they are, or are parading your own good fortune over their own.

Can you see where all of this is going? Heaven forbid anyone read **Flannery O'Connor**, or **William Faulkner**, or just about any Southern writer. Ditto that for any Russian, Irish, or Jewish writer. This approach also eliminates any Black writers, and, well, now that we look at it, all that's left is technical writing that doesn't rely on statistics.

In some ways, the chickens are coming home to roost, as we sometimes say in the South — but no offense intended to chickens or those who love them. The children of the generation of PC-eres have grown up, all of whom were part of "every child's a winner," when trophies were given to all participants, and where wrong answers do not exist even when they clearly do. We are all winners, leaders, champions, and supersmart, whether it's true or not, but again no offense, if any is taken.

I'm not sure where all this will take us but I fear that it will take us to a very bad end. If the university is not the place where you come to grips with what you believe, and with how to think critically, and with exposure to various kinds of thinking alien to your own, then it becomes nothing more than a very expensive club for lemmings. I came from a blue/white collar neighborhood and college for me began a time of both good and bad, smart and very stupid experimentation. But after it was over, I came out on the other side a better man, or so it seemed to me. Sure, my feelings were hurt, my provincial attitudes laughed at, and my beliefs, such as they were, challenged. The experience made me think, and hard, about the important things in life.

If trigger warnings and PC-redux proves true, then libraries are destined to be one of the first zones to be declared unsafe for any thinking.

And that will make them obsolete more quickly than anything any technology could ever hope to do. 🐔

