

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK

“Revolting Behavior” and Measured Responses

Sanford Pinsker

The flap kicked up by a conference on women's sexuality (“Revolting Behavior: The Challenges of Women's Sexual Freedom”) held last November on the SUNY–New Paltz campus continues to reverberate, and to disturb those who rightly wonder if anything, absolutely anything, has the right to call itself “academic study” and then stave off criticism with appeals to academic freedom. This is particularly true when conference planners allow non-academics to grab the spotlight. At the New Paltz confab, the owner of a Manhattan sex shop hawked her wares, a stripper from a bisexual bathhouse simulated a wide variety of sex acts (including sadomasochistic anal sex with a character costumed as a Hasidic Jew), and attendees learned about a network called the Lesbian Sexual Mafia, available for undergraduates who might like to experiment with what, in the new Newspeak, is called “an alternative sexual lifestyle.”

Not surprisingly, I followed the fireworks with keen interest. Passionate convictions were evident on both sides of the aisle—which, of course, makes this exactly the sort of story that makes for, well, a good story. Had the press merely concentrated on those panels that offered up traditional academic papers, who—other than women's studies mavens—would have cared? But with these in-your-face performances (if this puts indelicate matters “delicately”), one could expect a collision between outrage and defensiveness, and nobody drove away from New Paltz disappointed. Writing in the pages of the *Wall Street Journal*, Roger Kimball gave the conference's loopier proceedings the waxing they deserved (“a celebration of perversity and sexual libertinage”) while others called for the resignation, if not for the head, of New Paltz president Roger Bowen. By contrast, those who dislike any effort to curb what academics can say and do rallied around the flag of “academic freedom” and, predictably enough, soon the *New York Times* entered the fray to announce that New Paltz had emerged as “the newest bastion of free speech.”

Mulling over the theatrics at New Paltz, I kept reminding myself of two quite contradictory notions: that self-conscious efforts to “shock” are not worth

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a farthing if they fail to shock, and that biting one's tongue in the face of assaults against traditional scholarship is a recipe for future disaster. Give voice to your outrage and you risk coming off as a prig, exactly the sort of person who "just doesn't get it"; keep silent and you join the ranks of those who will choke on their complicity later.

What, I kept wondering, would these same steadfast defenders of wide-open, no-holds-barred conferences say about a symposium on militant militia groups that included presentations by their spokespersons and that featured tables in the outside lobby where curious undergraduates could sign up or buy manuals for making bombs? My hunch is that the same folks who thought "Revolting Behavior" was peachy would be among the very first to call in the cops and shut the "Destructive Behavior" conference down. Would they be moved by appeals to the "new discourses" that these skinheads spout? I suspect not. More important, could you persuade them that crypto-Nazis on parade represent yet another form that academic inquiry (and its attendant "freedom") can take? Again, not bloody likely. My limited experience suggests that what we'd hear is an insistence that my fanciful example is just that—fanciful, and moreover, that the New Paltz case is "different."

But is it? Precedents are, after all, precedents, and what is good for geese ought to be equally good for ganders. The rub, of course, is that when anything, absolutely anything, can lay claim to being "academic," distinctions no longer matter, and academic freedom no longer has a precisely defined point. Long before the women's studies program at New Paltz put together plans for its controversial gathering, I remember students who argued passionately that "falling in love" was, in and of itself, worthy of academic credit. Many faculty members were perplexed. Who, after all, wanted to be perceived as anti-love? As I said, this was long ago, at a time when nobody, including benighted students, imagined that X-rated panels on kinky sex could share conference space with postmodernist critiques fairly oozing with the latest cutting-edge jargon. What the students I'm talking about had in mind was nothing more or less than a hustle. Some professors went along for the ride, but held the line (or so they imagined) by insisting that students seeking course credit for falling in love write a term paper about the experience.

The wonder is that most students were able to keep from laughing until their office conference was over and they had safely returned to their dormitory rooms. After all, since the paper was, by definition, a personal account of how Bobby Smith fell madly with love with Amy Brown, there was no need to bother about research or footnotes. Even better, since this was an exercise in moi-criticism long before the term was coined, how could it be evaluated with other than an A? Not surprisingly, students pressed their case on any professors who would listen. "Revolting Behavior" is the contemporary avatar of this old student con.

If I have much to regret about my behavior during those earlier disruptive days, I can at least take a measure of solace in the fact that I bowed to nobody in my feeling that falling in love is among the most important of human experiences. But that alone didn't make it an academic enterprise. Quite to the contrary, I argued that love is much better off when savored on its own terms, and without giving course credit to the love smitten. Thus, I recommended courses in Plato's *Symposium*, selected Shakespeare plays, Elizabethan poetry, or certain French novels, but most students merely rolled their eyeballs and went shopping for a more sympathetic soul down the hall. I just didn't get it then, and I am happy to report that I don't get it now. Why, I keep asking myself, would anybody want to give a course in the graphic details of his or her sexual proclivities, and why on earth would anybody want to take it? Does this admittedly old-fashioned view mean that I'm a prude, or even worse? I don't think so, because as new paradigms announce themselves and the academic ground beneath our collective feet continues to shift, we find ourselves making good on George Orwell's quip that there are some things you can only learn at a university. He did not intend the remark as a compliment.

Orwell, alas, did not live long enough to observe the worst that "Revolutionary Behavior" had to offer. No doubt he would count this as one of the many blessings of expiration, while I have the pleasures, pains, and responsibilities of blood coursing through my veins. So, rather than rehearse, yet again, what has been said about "Revolutionary Behavior," I prefer to speak to a matter that has received decidedly less attention—namely, what it means, first of all, to be an academic discipline, and then what it means to be a "discipline" within a larger academic community.

Let me make it clear from the outset that I have long been skeptical about women's studies, largely because the enterprise struck me as being weightier on identity politics than on disinterested scholarship. Granted, many of feminism's original goals—everything from expanded job opportunities to an insistence on equal pay for equal work—were as reasonable as they were long overdue. And while I would hardly count myself among those who take inordinate pride in defining themselves as "male feminists," I saw then, and see now, more assets than liabilities in what was once touted as the feminist revolution.

America needs all the talent it can find—and women represent a sizable pool. But politics in the street, where one lobbies for political change, is one thing, and the conduct of college classrooms is another. Insofar as feminism brought its ever-changing agendas to the seminar table, the result could only diminish both real politics and academic inquiry. Moreover, because my academic beat is things literary, I tended to think of "feminist criticism" as a contradiction in terms. All too often its more doctrinaire practitioners fell into the habit of locating precisely what they were looking for—be it examples of patriarchal oppression or accounts of victimization's many faces. In the

process, what often went unnoticed is everything that makes novels, poems, and plays worth reading in the first place.

I have modified my views in recent years, partly because the sheer barrage of feminist scholarship includes items of genuine interest and sometimes of considerable merit. Even more important, I have become convinced that most of those who labor in the vineyards of women's studies do so honorably and often to good effect. Nonetheless, I remain worried that the claims of sisterhood can sometimes overwhelm the good sense of those who surely know better. The "Revolting Behavior" conference, while hardly an isolated case, is instructive. That most panels meant to talk about sexuality in responsible [read: academic] ways is true enough; however, that some abused the lectern is true as well. With regard to the latter, those who saw fit to invite people longer on sensationalism than on academic credentials bear a good deal of blame for the brouhaha that resulted.

Lost in the smoke screens of angry debate, however, was the still, small voice reminding all of us, those in women's studies as well as those engaged in more traditional pursuits, that academic freedom is premised on the disciplines' patrolling themselves. Not everything one claims he or she has a "right" to do is, as it were, right to do. What matters far more to academics—indeed, what is central to their mission—is the disinterested pursuit of truth, as a given discipline defines the concept, along with the rigor, logic, and evidence of one's argument. Private citizens rightly enjoy the full protection of the First Amendment; they can say nearly anything they want to, be it silly, shocking, or just plain nuts. But insofar as this private citizen is also a professor, there are restrictions about what can be publicly uttered, and then protected, under our long-established traditions of academic freedom.

To their shame, many academic feminists have been reluctant to censure those in their ranks who deserve to be marginalized. Instead, the former suffer silently while their discipline is systematically undermined by the latter. This strikes me as a very high price to pay with the coin of "political correctness" and as a recipe for insuring that women's studies will never receive the recognition it often rightly deserves.

I say this fully aware that we do not yet live in a sexless, colorblind society. Granted, the best ideas transcend the restrictiveness of identity politics, but tell that to those who hooted their approval at the "Revolting Behavior" conference. Many of these folks would no doubt prefer that I, a middle-aged, white male, butt out of this discussion—presumably because only women should comment on women's studies programs. But as part of an academic community that takes its commitment to liberal learning seriously, I cannot be silent, or be silenced. If there were solid evidence that even a sprinkling of feminist scholars were mightily uncomfortable about the shenanigans at New Paltz, and willing to say so in public print, I would have been happy to write about something else. Unfortunately, that is not yet the case, and we are in a situation where the best

scholarship about gender is likely to go unnoticed while the most outrageous displays become grist for political mills on the hard left as well as the hard right. Put another way: while I remain confident that good ideas ultimately triumph over bad ones, I confess that a part of me continues to worry, especially when so many people feel obliged to defend the indefensible.

It is high time that we heard from those willing to police a discipline that continues to promise more than it often delivers. I say this as a friend, someone who wishes the enterprise of women's studies well, but who is concerned that the same political correctness out to bully me is often even more insistent when it levels its sights on women in the movement who don't toe the party line.

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