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“Practicing social change”

On the appointment of the feminist Gayatri Spivak to the English faculty of Columbia University.

What do our major universities nowadays look for when the search committees set out on their quest for an outstanding candidate to fill the position of full professor in an English department? A record of distinction in literary scholarship? A reputation for high achievement in literary criticism? A well-earned name for devotion to the teaching of literature, and a solid history of success in that endeavor? Certainly not. None of these (outmoded?) criteria now counts for much with the current breed of academic decision makers. What is looked for—and usually found, too—is politics. Or, to be more precise, politically correct politics.

A case in point is the recent appointment of Gayatri Spivak to a full professorship in the Department of English at Columbia College. According to a report in *The Columbia Spectator*, the main campus newspaper, the appointment of Professor Spivak, who now serves on the faculty of the University of Pittsburgh, represented the culmination of “an extensive search for a feminist theorist” by the Columbia College English Department. No pretense was made about any literary credentials for this senior post in what was once one of the most distinguished departments of English in “Spivak’s specialties include feminist theory, post-structuralist theory, and post-colonial culture.”

Needless to say, this appointment was enthusiastically endorsed by the current “chair” of the department, Professor Joan Ferrante, who is quoted in the *Spectator* as follows: “What is exceptional is that [Spivak] works not only in women’s studies, but also post-colonialism. She brings a dimension of [to] women’s studies that we haven’t had before.” It was left to Martha Howell, the director of the Center on Women and Gender Studies at Columbia, to underscore the unabashedly political character of the appointment in her statement to the *Spectator*.

Although Spivak’s field of study is often esoteric, Howell said, her devotion to the practical application of feminism is accessible to everyone at Columbia.“Despite the fact that she’s a huge theorist, she’s absolutely committed to practicing social change,” she said. Practicing social change: This is indeed the name of the game these days, and this is what this high appointment to the faculty of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia is really about.

One of the best comments we have seen on this now widespread practice of basing academic appointments on politically correct ideology was John Searle's in *The New York Review of Books* for February 14. Searle is a distinguished professor of philosophy at the University of California at Berkeley, and on December 6 he published an essay in the *Review* called "The Storm Over the University." Responding to a letter from Gerald Graff that took issue with this essay, especially as it applied to Professor Graff's well-known defense of the politicization of the teaching of literature and the humanities, Professor Searle wrote:

> The idea that the curriculum should be converted to any partisan political purposes is a perversion of the ideal of the university. The objective of converting the curriculum into an instrument of social transformation (leftist, rightist, centrist, or whatever) is the very opposite of higher education. It is characteristic of the major totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century—leftist and rightist—that they try to make precisely such a conversion and the result is invariably the end of higher education as such, and its replacement by a mixture of political indoctrination and technical training.
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> Furthermore, for an individual professor to think that his own "particular courses" should become leftist "instruments" of social transformation is a violation of his obligations both to his students and to the institution, because the terms of his agreement with both are intellectual rather than political.

This is precisely the kind of violation that Gayatri Spivak's appointment to Columbia College represents—the kind of violation that is now embraced as routine academic policy. And by the way, Professor Graff, whose defense of these violations in the name of politics prompted Professor Searle's comments, has also lately reaped new benefits from this politically correct position. Later this year he moves from Northwestern University, where he is currently the John C. Shaffer Professor of Humanities and English, to an appointment as full professor in the Department of English at the University of Chicago.

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