

Forum

Update on the “Electoral Lock” Myth

If one applies the procedure described in my September *PS* article to the 1996 election, near-complete election returns indicate that Clinton’s “minimum popular majority” was 49.5% of the two-party vote, sufficient to tip Pennsylvania (the swing state) into his column for a total of 286 electoral votes. Indeed, Clinton’s strength in the Northeast and Far West in two consecutive elections has brought forth assertions of a new “lock” on the Democratic side. Two days after the election, a *Washington Post* article suggested that Democrats “may have built the foundation for a lasting advantage in the electoral college.” (Peter Baker and Edward Walsh, 11/7/96, p. A23)

But though Clinton carried virtually the same set of states in 1992, his “minimum popular majority” then was 50.66%. The average of the two elections was therefore 50.08%. So the electoral college has given Democrats no meaningful general advantage in the nineties, just as it gave none to Republicans in the seventies and eighties.

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Increasing Voter Turnout

“Northern Bourbons: A Preliminary Report on the National Voter Registration Act” by Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward (*PS*, March 1996) prompts me to write a brief note. It seems we don’t do that bad a job of getting people to register at least once in their lives, but with about one-fifth of Americans moving each year, the real problem is ease in up-dating registrations. While doing so by postcard, at drivers license stations, and welfare bureaus is a step in the right direction, it misses the most obvious method.

Only a minority of Americans have regular contact with the agencies named, and those who move within a state often do not have their driver’s licenses re-issued. As Piven and Cloward note, driver’s license renewal is on a four-year cycle, and only about 85% of 18–24-year-olds have licenses, but almost 100% of Americans of all ages have postal service.

Almost without fail, when people move, they notify the post office of their change of address so their mail will follow them. The reason few remember to notify the voting registrar, even with the new, easier post-card system, is that most move when there is not an election contest going on to bring this duty to the forefront of their minds. Therefore, I suggest we pass legislation requiring the post office to transform their change-of-address form into a three-part carbonless form with a box at the bottom stating “if you do *not* want your voting registration updated, check here.”

Unless checked, the bottom copy would be sent to the person’s current voting registrar and their name removed from the rolls if currently registered at that address, the second copy would be sent to the registrar corresponding to the new address where they would be added to the voting register, and the top copy of the form would remain with the post office for their usage. Yes, this would entail extra work on the part of the postal officials, but “motor voter” imposes this obligation on other portions of the government without the world coming to an end. The virtues of this system would be in the almost universal coverage and the use of the negative option.

Some might like the portion of my idea about adding the voter, but not see the utility to removing them from the rolls in the previous location. The purging of the rolls on a real-time basis rather than just every four years, etc., would not only aid candidates and parties who buy the

lists for “get-out-the-vote” calling, but would lead to more accurate statistics being reported in the media after elections are held. The local state representative recently spoke to my legislative politics class and said that of the 10,368 pieces of mail he sent out using the official list of registered voters in this district, 1,618 came back as deceased, moved, bad address, etc.!

I hope others who seek to make the right of voting more accessible to Americans will join me in championing the “postal patron-voter” bill.

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Teaching the “Canon” from the Perspective of a Woman of Color

Editor’s Note: The following piece was delivered as a part of a special plenary session, “Teaching Political Science in the 1990’s,” at the 1996 Canadian Political Science Association Annual Meeting. Featuring scholars from several leading Canadian institutions, the plenary sought to explore the troubles faced by today’s political science departments. Among other questions, do these troubles show the prevalence of sexism in our discipline or the dangers of political correctness for academic freedom?

In a time when many argue for inclusion of the “personal” within the definition of politics, this article tackles a controversial issue.

“Learn English!” a student once told me. Since I began teaching at the University of Guelph in 1991, students have directed a handful of similar comments at me. I have called campus police on three occasions to report on vandalism of my office door—including a particularly vulgar case of sexist graffiti with racist overtones. Once, a white woman, after having insulted me for daring to correct the grammar on her pa-

per, went tearfully to one of my senior male colleagues, claiming she was hurt by my refusal to discuss her grade. By the way, this colleague is a man of color. It is at least good to know that human pettiness is at times “color-blind.”

After teaching for several years, I have come to the conclusion that my gender, race, and probably my age, are all working against me. The classroom is to me a chilly place. I also think that what I teach makes the combination of my ascriptive characteristics even more vulnerable. It is telling that no student has ever challenged me on anything I said about China in my Chinese politics class. But students have asked me if I actually understood J.S. Mill or a first-year textbook discussion of the differences between authoritarianism and totalitarianism.

While Chinese politics is one of my teaching fields, I am a political theorist trained in the 1980s at the University of Toronto and Princeton University. This means I am well-versed in the canon of Western political thought—from Plato on. I know the “dead white males” pretty well. Furthermore, the few professors who made important impact on my intellectual training are all older males of European descent. I did not have a woman professor until graduate school at Princeton.

The issue that puzzles me most is this: how come I never felt so excluded until now—now that I am a professor, not a newly-arrived immigrant from Hong Kong who was an undergraduate at the University of Toronto or a foreign student attending graduate school at Princeton? Perhaps I was luckier then—I had one professor whose behavior toward me bordered on sexual harassment and another who directed a racist comment toward me. But nothing like what I experience as a professor. The first time I had an extensive discussion on this issue with the employment equity officer at my University, she suggested that students constantly look for excuses not to work hard and so they seize upon what they think are my vulnerable points, i.e. my gender, race, and lack of seniority.

This may indeed be the reason. I may also add that, ironically, as a

student, I had more leeway. I could walk away from courses taught by bigots and I could choose my friends. But as a professor, I cannot choose my students and I cannot walk away from them. Now I often feel trapped.

These unpleasant experiences make me think hard about my role on a Canadian campus. Current radical campus politics tells me that as a political theorist trained in the tradition of Western political thought I am, in fact, contributing to and perpetuating racism and sexism on campus. On two different occasions, campus groups asked me to talk about the issue of inclusiveness. I was, of course, expected to testify to the experience of exclusion. So in my soul-searching, I realized something about my intellectual development. When I was a teenager, I spent a lot of time reading fiction and non-fiction works of the May 4th period. May 4, 1919 was the date of a mass demonstration in Beijing against the Versailles Peace Settlement, which transferred Germany's control over Chinese territory to Japan rather than returning it to China. But more broadly understood, the May 4th Movement was an intellectual and cultural search for a solution to China's problems, questioning every Chinese tradition and looking to the West for inspiration to deal with China's political and cultural crisis.

Looking back, I am convinced that my curiosity about the West was shaped profoundly by the May 4th writers who argued that engagement with Western culture could enhance modern Chinese identity. So I told the audience in these campus gatherings that, when I studied Western political thought as a student, I never felt excluded because I knew all along that was just one way of looking at the world. As you may expect, my thoughts did not go over well! But thanks to these occasions of personal testimony, I am becoming more conscious than ever of the extent to which I have been influenced by Chinese intellectuals of the May 4th Movement.

These occasions of personal reflection have led me to conclude that while the canon of Western political thought may not speak to my personal experience, it has satisfied

my intellectual curiosity, a major component of my personal identity. I think that it is morally repugnant for anyone to suggest that because I am a woman of color whose mother tongue is Chinese, I have no business in Western political thought. It is equally repugnant to assume that because I am a woman of color, women of color should be the focus of my research and teaching.

But under current campus political climate, the fact that my intellectual interests do not coincide with my biological attributes has made me the easy target of reactionaries and radicals alike. I am, in short, in a no-win situation. Being more sympathetic to the left, I re-consider another claim that campus radicals would make on my behalf: that education is an insidious political weapon. If I don't find the education I received in the West alienating, it is probably because I was already thoroughly co-opted by a colonial system before I came to Canada.

Indeed, my pre-university school at which I spent a total of 15 years was a quintessential colonial enclave. It was a Catholic women's school run by a French order, whose objective was really to prepare young women to become well-behaved, suitably-refined colonial wives, complete with compulsory lessons on British cooking and ballet. Only after World War II did the school begin to admit Chinese. By the time I started schooling there, Chinese constituted about 80% of the student body and the teaching staff. When I was about to start the equivalent of Grade 3, the school announced a blatantly racist policy: the top five Chinese students from each class and all the non-Chinese (mostly British with a few Eurasians and Indians) were to be re-grouped into one class with French, instead of Chinese, as the second language (English being, of course, the first and compulsory language as it was the only official language in the colony, while one could choose between Chinese and French as the second language). I happened to be one of those few top Chinese students, though my parents decided it was more important for me to keep learning Chinese even at the price of being in an “inferior” class. The plan

never went through thanks to vehement protests from a large number of Chinese parents. Perhaps it was because of this nasty experience that I became more diligent than ever in reading Chinese books in my spare time. My first political act was in 1970 when I was still in primary school. I signed the petition lobbying for Chinese to become the second official language. Over the years, I have come to believe that one of the most pernicious aspects of British colonial education in Hong Kong is in depriving people of a language they can use to express themselves effectively. The typical Hong Kong secondary school graduate finds both English and written Chinese somewhat alienating. Furthermore, when I went through the school system, the curriculum in Chinese history, as opposed to European history, was designed in the most boring way possible and the textbooks were written in an archaic language bordering between classical and modern Chinese. The political objective seems clear.

My experience tells me there is nothing mysterious about the oppressive nature of colonialism; even a child can feel its oppressiveness. But it is simply not the same to be “left out” when a handful of privileged white kids from Trinity College professed their definitive words on Machiavelli (my experience in my first political theory tutorial at University of Toronto) and when a handful of white civil servants unilaterally rule over a non-white majority.

Some would argue that the former is a more subtle form of colonization and therefore more insidious. Perhaps. Yet I think that we intellectuals fool ourselves thinking that the canon of the dead white males is at the heart of all our political problems and that reinventing Western intellectual heritage will fix them. In the case of colonialism, nothing short of a revolution will change the situation. In the case of feeling marginalized, if those privileged kids realized that they had “excluded”

the only visible minority in that classroom who spoke with an accent and also happened to be one of the two women in the room, it was not because the topic was Christine de Pisan rather than Machiavelli. In the end, my feeling of inclusion would have come if they acted with plain decency. By decency, I mean the ability to listen to others and tolerate differences between people. Neither man nor woman, white nor non-white, the heterosexual nor the homosexual, the educated nor the uneducated, has exclusive claim to basic human decency. Otherwise, our world would be in a lot of trouble.

History has taught us the horror of using knowledge as a political weapon against one group or another. Yet neither does the pursuit of knowledge give one the licence to act indecently. Education should rather help us become more appreciative of one another as it enhances our capacity to engage different perspectives critically and productively. This, I believe, is my role as an educator. So far the education that I have experienced in the West is pretty good at doing this. I do not see liberal education as we know it categorically ruling out non-Western perspectives, nor is education the hegemonic terrain of white middle-class males. After a dose of John Stuart Mill, we can cross the Pacific and read works of the Chinese dissident Wei Jing-sheng and the Burmese democratic opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, as I do in my “Introduction to Politics” class. I choose these materials not because I am a woman of color with a political agenda to promote in the classroom. Rather, students should know how the classic argument for free speech is made in Western liberal democracy just as they should know how non-Westerners make comparable defense. When I teach Filmer’s defense of patriarchalism in my feminist theory course, I see room for a non-Western perspective. I point to my students that once you remove God from Filmer’s argument, the

justification for a patriarch is strikingly similar to Confucianism. This juxtaposition between Filmer and Confucius enables students to apprehend patriarchalism as a particular conception of political power that defies cultural specificities. But if this were the case, why bother with Filmer, Locke’s refutation of Filmer, and the birth of liberalism in a feminist theory course? Because feminism as we know it, both as a political movement and a critical perspective, was borne out of a void and a lack. This void, this lack, was in turn defined against liberal democracy and liberal political thought.

I want to leave you with two brief accounts of exchange I had with students. One student (a white single mother) said to me half way through my feminist theory course, “I came here to learn, not to feel better about myself. I don’t need to get into student loan to hear propaganda, whether feminist or anti-feminist. I am pleased that I am actually learning in your course.” Another student, a gay activist on campus and a man of color, in my feminist theory course fought with me over how I define feminism (i.e. that I fail to be inclusive). After our first exchange, I thought that I had a self-righteous “identity politics” type again and he would probably drop the course soon. Much to my surprise, he stayed and now he is doing a reading course with me on political oppression. Last week he asked me if he can submit a journal in lieu of book reviews as part of course requirements. As I understand it, the journal is going to be him, the activist, reflecting on praxis. I agreed to that, but I also reminded him that the final paper has to be an academic paper. He said, “I know; I’d like to learn, too.”

Perhaps there is still hope for me. But I can’t do it alone.

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