Phil Ryan, “Was Bloom PC?,” *Canadian Review of American Studies*, 26, no. 2, Spring 1996, 1-26.

[I]f I were called upon to write a book which was to be vested with the highest authority, I should prefer to write it in such a way that a reader could find re-echoed in my words whatever truths he was able to apprehend.

Augustine

*Allan* Bloom? The man whose *Closing of the American Mind* “best articulates the critique” of political correctness and “represents the key text” (Platt 1992, 123), who demonstrates “an excessively ossified, hierarchical, and immutable view of the cultural tradition” (Kurzweil et al 1991, 226), who has been “subjected to an unremitting barrage of criticism and abuse from the academic Left” (Kimball 1990, 3), whose “name has become virtually synonymous with traditionalist views of higher education” (DePalma 1992), who began a speech with the salutation “Fellow elitists” (1990, 13)?

Allan Bloom’s passionate opposition to many of the dearest values of the politically correct is well known. He was an ardent defender of the “great books,” appalled at deconstructionism, that “dogmatic, academic nihilism of the Left” (Ibid., 293), dismayed by the easygoing relativism of his students, and scornful of the spirit of “openness” that holds that “indiscriminateness is a moral imperative” (1988, 25, 30).

And yet, if there was one thing that Bloom stressed to his students, it was the importance of returning to the text without being captured by the conventional interpretations[[1]](#endnote-1). And Bloom also suggests that, “in what appears similar, one should look for the differences; and in the different, the similar” (1990, 306). When we return to the texts of Bloom himself, we find a writer whose concerns in the face of what is now termed political correctness coexist with certain affinities with that phenomenon. This essay will reexamine Bloom’s relation to the political correctness debate, and will argue that one’s location of Bloom within that debate depends upon how one understands the debate itself.

Various difficulties arise, however, when one seeks to examine the relation between the thought of Bloom and that of the politically correct. First, it is not clear that the latter exist. We seem to have an antithesis with no prior thesis, explicit opponents of political correctness without explicit proponents. While North Americans have been treated to various tomes warning of the perils of political correctness, the alleged carriers of the virus have limited themselves to critiquing the critique. Thus, this group might more accurately be termed the “anti-anti-PCs” (McGillvray 1991). Since this term is rather cumbersome, however, we will use the designation “politically correct,” which can be read as short-hand for “those labelled politically correct by their critics”[[2]](#endnote-2).

But there are also difficulties in pinning down the thought of Bloom. There is, first, a problem of voice: Bloom will go on, at times for pages, as an apparent medium for the voice of Nietzsche, Rousseau, Kant, and so on. When one reads that “[p]rogress culminates in the recognition that life is meaningless” (1988, 169), just who is speaking? Bloom? Rousseau according to Bloom? The very paucity of textual indicators that would allow the reader to answer this question with confidence is itself of interest: one has a text marked by “plausible deniability,” in which the author can simultaneously affirm and deny the affirmation[[3]](#endnote-3).

Yet even if we could identify Bloom’s *ipsissima verba*, a further difficulty presents itself. Like Reagan’s Soviets, Bloom’s philosophers reserve to themselves the right to lie and cheat. “The philosopher,” says Bloom, “loves the truth. That is an intellectual virtue. He does not love to tell the truth. That is a moral virtue” (1988, 279). This seems to turn Bloom’s work into a “This sentence is a lie” puzzle. Is the real Bloom the writer who scorns generalizations and pleas for concreteness (Ibid., 254; 1990, 307), or the man who roundly declares that the “dreariness of the family’s spiritual landscape passes belief” (1988, 57), “feminists favor the demystifying role of pornography” (Ibid., 104), and “we are all unbelievers or very wishy-washy believers” (1977, 9)? Is Bloom an opponent of deconstructionism, or a closet deconstructionist angry with Derrida and company for spilling the beans (Levine 1995, 185)?

For the sake of this study we will assume that, to the extent Bloom knows what he means, he means what he says. There are serious inconsistencies in the text, but we will not eliminate these inconsistencies through a reading that dismisses the bulk of the text as exoteric garb[[4]](#endnote-4).

The first section of this essay will argue that, if one accepts the PC account of the political correctness debate, the conventional understanding of Bloom is quite adequate. Paradoxically, however, if one accepts the anti-PC account of the debate, Bloom’s location becomes quite problematic. We will demonstrate this in the second section. This will lead us to question whether the debate is not in large part a struggle of “fraternal enemies.”

**I.** *Bloom the anti-PC*

According to those conventionally labelled politically correct, what is the anti-PC project? “[T]he control and alteration of the American campus, down to its smallest detail” (Fish 1994, 55). But this, of course, is a political project that dare not speak its name. Hence the sacred cause of freedom is enlisted in this enterprise, which is presented as a heroic effort to save the university from the politically correct threat to its freedom.

But the anti-PCs are nothing if not great marketers: they know that cosmic struggles between good and evil sell better than ambiguous narratives. Thus political correctness becomes, not a questionable doctrine, but a “disease”[[5]](#endnote-5), while the pre-PC university is presented in the most glowing terms, a “bastion of free speech” (Kimball 1990, 68) in which “disinterested” academics devoted themselves to the study and teaching of the “best that has been thought and said.” Even now, a band of lonely heretics stands firm against the new PC orthodoxies[[6]](#endnote-6).

This anti-PC account of things, of course, requires a certain concealment of other threats to university freedom and vitality. As Jacoby notes, the anti-PC lament for the state of liberal education rarely mentions the problem of illiberal *society* (1994, 8)[[7]](#endnote-7). Business influence is passed over in silence (Phelps 1991, 54), as is the long history of external attempts to control universities (Jacoby 1994, 53-55). Where this is not entirely possible, past threats are rhetorically enlisted in the new cause, and political correctness becomes a “McCarthyism of the left” (D’Souza 1992, 195).

But if all this rhetoric is a mask for a project to consolidate control of the university, just what is to be done with this control? Three interrelated goals are suggested. The first recalls Smith’s comment that many “learned societies” have remained a shelter for “exploded systems and obsolete prejudices” that have been “hunted out of every other corner of the world” (1937, 727). The Cold War having been won, it is time to chase exploded systems such as Marxism out of the academy. The peculiarity of the university, argues Phelps, is not that it is a place where the left is hegemonic, but that it is a place where the right is *not*. It thus remains a terrain of debate, unlike most of U.S. society, and this is what the right wants to end (1991, 55).

A second goal would be to deflect a demand thought powerful in society at large, the demand for the recognition of diversity. On the campus, this demand is expressed in calls for the promotion of diversity in admissions and hiring, for the regulation of speech deemed racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise disrespectful of diversity, and for the revision of curriculum to weaken the focus on the writings of “Dead White European Males.” But since diversity is a tough value to oppose forthrightly, its opponents will mobilize a variety of rhetorical devices in order to “Turn Bigotry and Ignorance into Moral Principles,” as Stanley Fish puts it (1994, 89). The main target of the anti-PCs will be the alleged intolerance of those who proclaim tolerance for the “Other,” an intolerance that manifests itself in draconian speech codes or the harassment of guileless professors.

In any case, the anti-PC will argue, those who claim to fight against racism and sexism have already won, and should relax. Phenomena that might *appear* to represent sexism, racism, or homophobia are in fact “reflexive, ill-considered” reactions to the politically correct “victim’s revolution” (D’Souza 1992, 19). Many people “have simply *had it* with minority double standards and intimidation” (Ibid., 228). The anti-PC opponents of diversity will also play to the fear that society is coming apart at the seams, that its centre can no longer hold: in this situation, education should once again promote “a common culture rooted in civilization’s lasting vision, its highest shared ideals and aspirations” (William Bennett, cited in Kimball 1990, 4).

A third, closely related, goal of the anti-PC offensive would be the defeat of new theoretical trends such as deconstructionism and feminist theory. This goal might reflect a desire to avoid “an unwanted intellectual ʻretooling’ for professors late in their careers” (Brennan 1991, 21), or an attempt to restore the tattered legitimacy of the “common culture” upon which the hopes of American society are said to rest, by insulating “the best that has been thought and said” from corrosive criticism.

If this PC account of the debate is accepted, then Bloom can be located squarely within the ranks of the anti-PCs. Like other heroes of the anti-PC cause, Bloom received generous funding from the John M. Olin Foundation, which supports an entire herd of courageous heretics[[8]](#endnote-8). Like them, he decries threats to university freedom, the proliferation of “things unthinkable and unspeakable” (1988, 324). Like them, Bloom both minimized the impact of past threats to the university, in particular the threat of McCarthyism[[9]](#endnote-9), and alluded to McCarthyism to describe the current “threat”[[10]](#endnote-10).

Like other anti-PC writers, Bloom had little patience for the presence within the university of Marxism, a doctrine simply “unbelievable to anyone who thinks” (1988, 219). The diversity movement, for its part, had merely ushered in a “diversity of perversity” (338), whilst ignoring the “real differences among men” (192). Among its crimes, the diversity movement had a baleful effect upon intellectual freedom: the “organized system of grievance and feeling aggrieved” (95), the “radicals” who bandy about charges of “elitism, sexism and racism,” all have created an atmosphere that makes “detached, dispassionate study impossible” (354-55). Feminism, in particular, was creating a new “Terror,” complete with “censors” and “inquisitional tribunals” (101). Charting a course that writers such as D’Souza would later follow, Bloom argued that, in any case, the advocates of diversity were banging on doors that were already open. The equality of women is now taken completely for granted in the university (Ibid., 90), and blacks are obsessed with “exclusion when it no longer effectively exists” (93)[[11]](#endnote-11).

Finally, Bloom staunchly opposed various new theoretical trends, in particular all efforts to discover the economic, racial, or gender conditioning of the classic texts. Feminism, which itself had produced nothing but “second level books... manifestos” (1977, 8), was the “latest enemy of the vitality of classic texts” (1988, 65), while deconstructionism “liberates us from the objective imperatives of the texts” (379). Thus we must return to “the good old Great Books approach” (344), putting aside “the burning torches of whimsical interpretation” (1990, 294) in order “to read books as their writers intended them to be read” (1988, 375).

The list of similarities between Bloom and the anti-PC movement is a long one. But these similarities have emerged within a specific account of the political correctness debate, the account given by the allegedly politically correct. What happens if we adopt a different perspective, understanding the debate by focusing on some of the issues dearest to the heart of the anti-PCs? From this angle, a different Bloom emerges.

**II.** *The PC Bloom*

What’s wrong with political correctness? We will focus upon three of the sins regularly denounced by its opponents: political correctness (i) unleashes a horde of “Busybodies and Crybabies”[[12]](#endnote-12) eager to reform the rest of us, in particular by purging our language of all sorts of allegedly offensive words; (ii) threatens academic freedom; (iii) hyper-politicizes life, including education and the aesthetic realm. But on all these issues, Bloom stands closer to the politically correct than to their critics. We will examine Bloom’s position on the importance of language, the problem of freedom, and the relation between politics, literature, and education.

*The power of language*. No aspect of political correctness has provided as much raw material for cartoonists and stand-up comics as the attempt to reform language. Robert Hughes’s critique of this effort is a typical statement of the anti-PC position. We now seek out, he says

words that cannot possibly give any offence, however notional. We do not fail, we underachieve. We are not junkies, but substance abusers; not handicapped, but differently abled... If these affected contortions actually made people treat one another with more civility and understanding, there might be an argument for them. But they do no such thing (Hughes 1993, 20).

Efforts at language reform, Hughes insists, forget that “words are not deeds and mere nomenclature does not change much.” Thus, “PC talk” is about “political etiquette, not politics itself” (Ibid., 24). This quite commonsensical position holds that there is a real world out there in which deeds and politics take place, and that language passively reflects this world. As another critic of political correctness put it: “language tends to follow instead of lead. It can never be forced to be any more enlightened than its speakers are” (Jones 1992, 27).

The opposing position holds that, even if there is a real world out there, our access to it is mediated by language:

It is language about political events, not the events in any other sense, that people experience; even developments that are close by take their meaning from the language that depicts them. So political language *is* political reality; there is no other so far as the meaning of events and actors and spectators is concerned (Edelman 1988, 104).

Nor is this medium purely passive. Language “has been promoted to a constitutive role,” and declared able “to bring facts into being rather than simply report on them” (Fish 1994, 56). It is the medium through which “reality” is “socially constructed.” But if language shapes the world, then the reform of language is no idle past-time, and may in fact be the most profound form of politics: “The part of a revolution that is really revolutionary is a new... way of speaking about the meaning of being a human being, one that allows for possibilities not present in the previous speaking on that subject” (Ellis 1989, 52).

Bloom, for his part, stood squarely with those who reject the view that language is passive:

In Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, an admirably educated class of “velvet” revolutionaries is breaking the chains of a barbarous jargon which stood between them and the world *and which constituted at least half of the tyranny which oppressed them* (1990, 11; emphasis added).

The “pollution of language,” Bloom insists, “although less feared than the other kind, is really more deadly. It is the intellectual disorder of our age” (1988, 182). The disorder is not ‘merely’ intellectual, however, as it profoundly affects the way people live their lives: “as the language derived from nihilism has become a part of [Americans’] educations and insinuated itself into their daily lives, they pursue happiness in ways determined by that language” (155). Thus, significant portions of Bloom’s *Closing of the American Mind* seek to provide an “explanatory dictionary of our current language” (156), because the “entirely new language of good and evil” is “*the* most important and astonishing phenomenon of our time” (141). Certainly anything more important than the rise and fall of communism, or the Holocaust, or the development of nuclear weapons, or the possible extinction of life on earth, is not to be ridiculed.

Bloom seeks to combat the pollution of language by attacking various phrases in whose noxious grip modern society finds itself:

“Life-style” justifies any way of life, as does “value” any opinion. It does away with the natural structure of the world, which is only raw material for the stylist’s artistic hand. The very expression makes all moralisms and naturalisms stop short at the limit of the sacred ground, aware of their limits and respectful of creativity... What actually goes on in a counterculture or a life-style - whether it is ennobling or debasing - makes no difference. No one is forced to think through his practices. It is impossible to do so... The mere words change everything (Ibid., 235).

What would happen, Bloom wondered, “if we were to make a law forbidding the use” of the words he has dissected?

These words are there where thoughts should be, and their disappearance would reveal the void. The exercise would be an excellent one, for it might start people thinking about what they really believe, about what lies behind the formulas. Would “living exactly as I please” be speakable as a substitute for “life-style”? Would “my opinion” do for “values”? “My prejudices” for my “ideology”? Could “rabble-rousing” or “simply divine” stand in for “charisma”? (Ibid., 238)

The reader may object that, while Bloom sought to purge language in order to clarify our thought, the politically correct want to mangle our speech so that we may avoid giving offence - real or imagined - and that these are entirely different goals. But this objection misses the vital continuity between Bloom and the politically correct. The view that language shapes behaviour, shared by Bloom and the politically correct yet excoriated by the anti-PCs, really is quite important. Consider a typical response to the politically correct stance on language: “I’m as opposed to racism and sexism as the next person, but changing words is pointless. Let’s focus on *real* change.” But Bloom and the politically correct would have to answer that the distinction between real change and merely linguistic change, between “political etiquette,” and “politics itself,” is a spurious one. To the scoffers who say “language does not have such effects,” Bloom replies that “the language is all around us,” and “the categories of the mind determine the perceptions” (Ibid., 240). Given the tremendous implications of this assertion for our understanding of political life, it is fair to view the differing objectives of Bloom and the politically correct as a mere intramural squabble among those who assert the centrality of language[[13]](#endnote-13).

We might add that it is far from clear that the politically correct merely wish to remove possible causes for offence from our vocabulary. Consider the replacement of “able-bodied” by “temporarily able-bodied” (Zola 1993, 171). This hardly seems designed to shield the sensitivities of the disabled/handicapped/differently abled/persons with disabilities, who probably do not lose much sleep worrying about what the able-bodied choose to call themselves. But how does it affect the latter group? The Psalmist defines the “fool” as one who believes “from age to age I shall be without misfortune” (Ps. 10). The “temporarily able-bodied” label is one small assault on the “vain conceit” that “this flesh which walls about our life were brass impregnable,” a reminder that we are embodied and subject to decay (*Richard II*, 3.2.)[[14]](#endnote-14).

For Bloom, “*The* uncompromisable difference that separates the philosophers from all others concerns death and dying” (1988, 285)[[15]](#endnote-15). The philosopher knows that “the rational, calculating, economic man” is irrational, because he “never takes account of the fact that he must die” (289-90). From this perspective, a linguistic shift that makes the denial of death and decay a little bit more fragile and thus draws people a little bit closer to the spirit of the philosopher is no doubt to be welcomed[[16]](#endnote-16).

*Academic and other freedoms*. The position of the politically correct on academic freedom and freedom of speech is straightforward: even if such freedoms are of value, they are but one value among many, not a fundamental value that can trump all others[[17]](#endnote-17). Thus Karel Liem argues that “the pain that racial insensitivity can create is more important than a professor’s academic freedom” (Detlefsen 1989, 20), while for John Jeffries, “freedom of expression is no more sacred than freedom from intolerance or bigotry” (D’Souza 1992, 147).

The anti-political correctness position sounds a number of recurring themes. The first is that the benefits of an unfettered marketplace of ideas outweigh the costs. As Yale University President Benno Schmidt put it, “offensive, erroneous and obnoxious speech is the price of liberty” (1991). It is postulated, or assumed, that this liberty is worth the price, and that it is worth the price to all concerned. The response to hateful speech is to work through the marketplace of ideas: “the way to deal with bigoted language is to answer it with more and better language of your own” (Hentoff 1992, 221). Speech born of “ignorance or even hate” should be tolerated “so long as others are left free to answer” (Schmidt 1991).

But many economists who advocate market freedom in principle are nevertheless willing to accept restraints on that freedom. Can we not do likewise for the marketplace of ideas? Is that marketplace really damaged, for example, by banning the claim that the Holocaust did not take place? Here the foes of political correctness sound their second theme: freedom of speech is indivisible. Any particular limit on speech, however reasonable it may appear, puts society on a slippery slope that has no stopping point[[18]](#endnote-18): “permissible speech will become more and more narrowly defined. Once speech can be limited in such subjective ways, more and more expression will be included in what is forbidden” (Hentoff 1992, 222). Thus the threat of political correctness is greater than at first sight appears: while it may begin by targeting particularly spiteful forms of speech, it will soon seek to shut down the entire marketplace of ideas. If this is to be avoided, the disease must be fought now, before it spreads. As Shakespeare’s Duke of Clarence put it, “A little fire is quickly trodden out; Which, being suffered, rivers cannot quench” (*King Henry VI, Part III*, 4.8).

Bloom’s position on all this could give little comfort to the foes of political correctness. He noted Gulliver’s report that the king of Brobdingnag “said he knew no reason why those who entertain opinions prejudicial to the public should be obliged to change or should not be obliged to conceal them. And, as it was tyranny in any government to require the first, so it was weakness not to enforce the second.” Bloom then commented:

This view presupposes that there is a sensible understanding of the politically beneficial that a ruler may acquire and that there is no reason to compromise the understanding conducive to the general welfare with the freedom of fanatical minorities. Although *this is the reasonable position*, it does not imply that, given particular circumstances, other doctrines might not be momentarily necessary or helpful (1990, 42, 43; emphasis added).

One waits for an “on the other hand,” but it never comes. Bloom was clearly not among those who believe that all things work to the good in the free marketplace of ideas, a view he dismisses as “optimistic” (1988, 28). Indeed, when he cites with approval the Founders’ view that “there should be no tolerance for the intolerant” (29), Bloom articulates the fundamental PC case for speech codes.

The argument is not that Bloom would have endorsed the particular restraints on speech demanded by those conventionally labelled politically correct, but that a “Bloomian” response to such demands cannot rely upon the bland assertions that the answer to hate speech is “more and better” speech and that the marketplace of ideas is to be defended against all challenges.

On the specific question of academic freedom, Bloom’s position was also nuanced: “The right that reformers attempted to establish was for scientists to be unhindered in the use of their reason, in the areas in which they are competent, to solve the problems posed by nature. Reason and competence are to be underlined here” (1988, 260-1). This formulation entails that politically correct restraints on professors’ exercise of their “reason and competence” are to be resisted. But it also implies that incompetence and the abuse of professorial privilege cannot be defended by appeals to academic freedom, as some foes of political correctness are wont to do[[19]](#endnote-19).

In fact Bloom’s entire discussion of academic freedom reads like an insurance policy from hell: when all the exclusions are listed, hardly anything is left covered. Bloom’s academic freedom does not constitute protection for “ʻintellectual honesty’, ʻcommitment’ and that kind of thing”, nor for “fanaticism and interests,” nor for “eccentric or mad opinions or life-styles.” All these things “only get in the way of the university’s activity, and open it to suspicion and criticism” (1988, 261)[[20]](#endnote-20).

Further, not even those who eschew all the vices Bloom has listed are safe: their “reason and competence” must be exercised within “the small number of disciplines that treat the first principles of all things”: “philosophy, mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, and the science of man” (1988, 261). Within each of these disciplines, there are further exclusions: the study of science to be protected, for example, involves the study of those “like Newton, Descartes, and Leibniz” (254), but excludes “mathematical physics,” which is guilty of having “chopped up and chewed over its inheritance” (206), while the “science of man” seems to include only the sort of political theory practiced by Bloom[[21]](#endnote-21).

After all these exclusions, we would be left with a congenial band of “rare theoretical men” (1988, 261), those “who desire to know and can know” (288)[[22]](#endnote-22). Thus, we arrive at an academic regime far more restrictive than any dreamed up by other advocates of political correctness. Ironically, few if any of the hapless professorial victims of political correctness whose travails have been chronicled by D’Souza and others would actually be protected within the Bloomian university.

*Politics, literature, and education*. A recurring charge against political correctness concerns its tendency to politicize all of life. For Robert Hughes, “[p]olitics ought not be all-pervasive. Indeed, one of the first conditions of freedom is to discover the line beyond which politics may not go” (1993, 114). Jean Elshtain argues that, while the feminist slogan “the personal is political” has its virtues, loss of the distinction between the personal and political spheres leaves a world without “genuinely political” institutions, one where nothing exists but “pervasive force, coercion, and manipulation: power of the crassest sort suffusing the entire social landscape” (1993, 43).

The politically correct answer is, more or less, “that’s life.” We may lament the pervasiveness of the political, but that is the way things are:

Every aspect of one’s life, no matter how trivial or local to oneself, is in some way (in many ways, simultaneously and not necessarily consistently) located in the currents and landscapes of politics and tends to reinforce or to alter some aspects of one’s alignment and affiliation within that fluid structure (Frye 1992, 783).

In this account, Jeremiads over the politicization of life are in fact laments for a lost world in which particular political values went unquestioned[[23]](#endnote-23).

Bloom’s views on this question carry interesting echoes of political correctness. While he anticipated the anti-PC attack on “the absurdity of trying to make politics total” (1990, 173), Bloom certainly gave implicit approval to the view that the personal is political: divorce has clear political implications as it creates “indignation and an inextirpable sense of injustice” among its children (1988, 119)[[24]](#endnote-24). So too does rock music, which, apart from fomenting onanism, weakens parental authority and encourages “indignation,” “hate, masquerading as social reform,” and longing for a “universal society” (74).

On the relation of politics to literature, Bloom came down squarely on the side of the politically correct. Opponents of political correctness decry its “eagerness to subordinate literature to an extraneous political agenda” (Kimball 1990, 41), its “supplanting of esthetic by political responses” (Will 1991)[[25]](#endnote-25). Roger Kimball goes so far as to argue that “the use of literature - indeed the use of any art - for nonartistic ends is something that has to be criticized” (Kurzweil et al 1991, 222), a position under which Bach’s Magnificat or Michelangelo’s Pietà would stand condemned alongside the crudest works of socialist realism.

The politically correct counter that the view that “art cannot be sharply separated from politics” has a long lineage, stretching back to Plato (Graff 1992, 145). Foes of political correctness, Stanley Fish argues, are “scandalized by the fact that some professors now teach Shakespeare with an eye to gender tensions and class conflict; but of course plays like *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Coriolanus* are about little else, and no one has ever thought otherwise” (1994, 96).

Bloom for his part decries the fact that “politics was purged” from the study of the classics (1988, 65). His introductory political philosophy class at the University of Toronto included the thoroughly political *Gulliver’s Travels*, but also the less-obviously political *Madame Bovary*, and he co-authored a book on Shakespeare’s politics. Of Shakespeare’s history plays he wrote: “Here his intention was clearly political, and his understanding of what is both beautiful and exciting to his audience is based primarily on the concerns of civil society” (1990, 61). Shakespeare’s “greatest heroes are rulers who exercise capacities which can only be exercised within civil society” (56). Bloom went so far as to assert that “the man of political passions and education is in a better position to understand the plays than a purely private man,” and that “an art uninspired by the passion for justice is trivial” (56-7, 63).

With respect to education, Bloom was certainly as appalled as any critic of political correctness at particular forms of politicization that have emerged in recent decades. He lamented that, with the “disruptions” of the 1960s, “[t]he university was incorporated much more firmly into the system of democratic public opinion, and the condition of cavelike darkness amidst prosperity feared by Tocqueville was brought painfully near” (1988, 319). But Bloom could not criticize this trend in the name of “disinterested” or “apolitical” education:

Every educational system has a moral goal that it tries to attain and that informs its curriculum. It wants to produce a certain kind of human being... In some nations the goal was the pious person, in others the warlike, in others the industrious. Always important is the political regime, which needs citizens who are in accord with its fundamental principle (Ibid., 26).

Thus, Bloom’s dispute with other academics was not about whether political considerations should shape education, but about the “certain kind of human being” that our political regime requires.

Roger Kimball laments the decline of “the ideal of disinterested scholarship.” Following Matthew Arnold, he defines this as a stance “steadily refusing to lend itself to any... ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas” (Kimball 1990, 36, 74; elision in Kimball)[[26]](#endnote-26). But Bloom’s teaching was very “interested,” and this is what gave it its greatness. He challenged us to defend our beliefs: were justice, equality, or university democracy more than slogans for us, would we be able to justify these goods if they should some day fall out of fashion? The classroom atmosphere was certainly not one of aloofness from “ulterior, political, practical considerations”[[27]](#endnote-27).

This review of some points of contact between Bloom and the politically correct should lead us to question the easy inclusion of Bloom within the anti-PC project, at least as that project has been defined by those opposed to political correctness. If we return now to review some of the similarities between Bloom and opponents of political correctness, we find differences hidden beneath those similarities.

First, while Bloom dismissed the McCarthyite impact on the university, he did not share the tendency of many to pretend that political correctness is the only threat to the university. He repeatedly decries the impact of “careerism” and the university programs that pander to it (1988, 340, 369-70, 59, 41-2; 1990, 352-4). Nor does he think much of those parts of the universities entrusted with the care of his beloved classics, which were “saved only on the condition of being mummified” (1988, 372).

Second, while Bloom occasionally used the now-familiar anti-PC lament for the loss of “shared goals or vision” (Ibid., 27), he also recognized irreducible difference, noting that the Founders “entertained no hopes” of producing a “homogeneous citizenry” (31)[[28]](#endnote-28). Third, while Bloom attacked deconstructionism, it is not clear that he was willing to subordinate himself to the “objective imperatives of the texts” (1988, 379). Leaving aside the controversial question of whether Bloom’s reading of Plato’s *Republic* follows his own methodological imperative “that an author first be understood as he understood himself” (1990, 61), he clearly violates this rule in his treatment of various moderns[[29]](#endnote-29). And while Bloom laments the assumption that “what Plato or Dante had to say about reality is unimportant” (1988, 375), he wields the same assumption in his treatment of, *inter alia*, various modern-day philosophers of science, who are condemned without a hearing not because their claims are *false*, but for having provoked “a sinister loss of confidence in the idea of science” (183)[[30]](#endnote-30).

Fourth, while Bloom sounds much like Kimball or D’Souza in his advocacy of “the good old Great Books approach” (1988, 344), his defence of this approach is unique. After proclaiming his agreement with almost every charge levelled against the “Great Books cult,” Bloom declares in its defence that students exposed to this approach are “excited and satisfied” (Ibid.): but given what he has told us in the first part of his book about just what excites modern students, this is odd praise indeed. The puzzle is clarified when one realizes that Bloom is planning only for “those few who come to the university with a strong urge for *un je ne sais quoi*” (64). In contrast to the projects advocated by such as D’Souza, Kimball, or William Bennett, Bloom argues that we “are long past the age when a whole tradition could be stored up in all students” (64). For the others, superficial exposure to Arnold’s “best that has been thought and said” could well yield “nothing but petty *amour-propre*” (205)[[31]](#endnote-31).

**III.** *Conclusion*

Bloom *was* generously funded by the Olin Foundation. His work was praised by D’Souza, Kimball, and company, *not* by Fish, Dworkin or MacKinnon. He was lumped together with William Bennett and Saul Bellow, the “Killer B’s” supposedly anathematized by the politically correct (Bernstein 1989, 15). Thus, in deference to the views of well-nigh everyone who has written on the matter, we will accept that the answer to our title question is no, Bloom was *not* PC.

To solve the puzzle presented in the second part of this paper, then, we must question the anti-PC position on what is at stake in the political correctness debates. Rather than Manichean struggles between common-sense and an obsessive concern with language, between free speech and Orwellian controls, between the noble autonomy of art or education and grimy politics, the debates we are witnessing appear to concern *whose* language reforms, restrictions on freedom, and politics shall prevail. Indeed, if there were no “outside” to the PC debates, one would be tempted to agree with Fish’s grim argument that “someone is always going to be restricted next, and it is your job to make sure that the someone is not you” (1994, 111)[[32]](#endnote-32).

My intention is certainly not to suggest that anything upon which the politically correct and their foes can agree must be true. On the contrary, I believe that many points upon which agreement exists are in fact false, and that the debate has probably increased the social currency of those falsehoods. When a debate is given as much media coverage as this one, one can assume that the shared assumptions of the debate are probably embedding themselves ever more deeply in our culture. Thus, to critique the universe of discourse constructed by a particular debate, we must focus on the various points upon which the parties to a debate implicitly agree, rather than those points that generate the most sound and fury.

I am not going to undertake such a critique here, but I would suggest that one point of entry would be to focus on a curious quality of the PC debates. Consider two apparently unrelated declarations:

[I]t makes perfect sense to desire the silencing of beliefs inimical to yours, because if you did not so desire, it would be an indication that you did not believe in your beliefs (Fish 1994, 118).

Every educational system has a moral goal that it tries to attain and that informs its curriculum. It wants to produce a certain kind of human being... Always important is the political regime, which needs citizens who are in accord with its fundamental principle. Aristocracies want gentlemen, oligarchies men who respect and pursue money, and democracies lovers of equality (Bloom 1988, 26).

What unites these two statements is a failure to acknowledge that our beliefs and needs - at both an individual and social level - are multiple, that they can be in tension with one another (*not* the simple tension between truth and error), and that they cannot be located in a simple ranking that would permit easy resolution of such tensions.

Thus, to Fish one could reply that many people *do* have passionately-held beliefs, yet do not desire to “silence” others, precisely because we can believe in many things simultaneously, including the right of others to articulate their own views, and we do not order our beliefs in some tidy hierarchy[[33]](#endnote-33). The ability of so many people to grasp this simple truth has probably helped as much as anything to make modern life possible.

Bloom’s statement, for its part, suggests that regimes are simple things indeed: each one needs “a certain kind of human being,” has its own “fundamental principle,” and even its characteristic vice (1988, 249-50)[[34]](#endnote-34). But the simple folk wisdom that holds that “it takes all kinds to make a world” is closer to the truth. Even the most ideal of aristocracies, in which the lovers of wisdom lay about and heap contempt on the simulacra of community they see all around them, will need someone to cook and empty the ashtrays.

As for modern democracy, its needs are many. If we leave aside conceptions of democracy that pay attention to the etymology of the word and little else, and inquire of the nature of democracy in our time, one of the most important aspects of that nature is that we live in *capitalist* democracies, historically implausible beasts in which great inequalities of power and wealth are somehow coordinated with formal political equality. The tensions inherent in this model, in the project of subjecting government “instituted for the defence of the rich against the poor” (Smith 1937, 674) to universal suffrage, have occupied a range of thinkers over the past two centuries, but scarcely seem to interest Bloom at all.

A second key characteristic of modern democracy is the strength of its administrative apparatus, and the difficulty in subjecting that apparatus to democratic control. Bloom mentions this fact in passing (1988, 85), but does not draw out its implications. One obvious implication is that the belief system that emerges within and sustains our administrative and capitalist democracy has many strands, and no necessary coherence. The postulate of equality upon which Bloom focuses so much attention is *part* of the picture, though it need not be shared even by those who accept universal suffrage[[35]](#endnote-35). “Hostility and excessive contempt for the people,” to which Bloom believes we are largely immune (1988, 249-50), is also part of the mix, particularly among administrative and economic elites[[36]](#endnote-36). Thus, Bloom’s apparently simple and unified regime is in fact a complex and contradictory phenomenon.

If this view of the “PC problem” is correct, one should be able to show that the fraternal enemies of the PC debates are fundamentally united by a failure to acknowledge that politics (or for that matter language, art or education) pursues a range of objectives simultaneously, objectives that can never fully be reconciled with one another. By extension, transcendence of the PC debates would involve thinking through the implications of this irreducible plurality of objectives, needs, and beliefs.

Notes

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1. In his introductory political philosophy class at the University of Toronto, Bloom insisted that we write our papers on *The Republic* without consulting secondary sources, including his own interpretive essay. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. As Calvin Trillin notes, “Since no one claimed to be politically correct himself - those under suspicion tended to argue that the condition did not exist - political correctness could be defined only by people interested in warning against it” (1993). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Shortly after his conversion, Ignatius of Loyola transcribed passages from various pious books, writing “the words of Christ, in red ink, and those of Our Lady, in blue” (1991, 107). It is devoutly to be hoped that some disciple of Bloom will do the same with the master’s work, in order to separate Bloom from Bloom’s Nietzsche, Bloom’s Rousseau, or Bloom’s Plato. In the meantime, the interpreter must acknowledge the ambiguity of voice that characterizes key passages. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. That is, we will treat of Bloom the phenomenon, and bracket the relation between this phenomenon and the “noumenal” Bloom, since our object of analysis is not what Bloom “really” believed, but the nature of the political correctness debate and the location of Bloom’s work in that debate. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Kimball, cited in Berubé (1992, 133). The metaphor recalls the chilling opening passage of Vassilikos’s *Z*. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. These lonely few, critics respond, are in fact a well-organized network with resources at its disposal that dwarf those of their opponents (Fish 1994, 55, 93; Messer-Davidow 1992, 19). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. No anti-PC tract, to my knowledge, has noted the impact upon liberal education of the thinking expressed in Ronald Reagan’s question “Why should we subsidize intellectual curiosity?” [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. The Olin Foundation funded, *inter alia*, D’Souza (1992), Kimball (1990), Sommers (1994), and Brock (1993). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. In 1977, Bloom gave an interview to a student newspaper at the University of Toronto that anticipated many of the themes of his *Closing of the American Mind* and deplored the “reluctance to think about unpopular alternatives” (1977, 7). I responded with a letter that suggested that the blame for this “reluctance” might be shared by “those who acquiesced to McCarthyism’s murder of debate within the universities” (Ryan 1977, 3). The following day Bloom accosted me on the street, telling me that I had no idea what I was talking about, that McCarthyism had not cost “a single professor” his job. This latter claim was so remarkable that I was not entirely sure I had heard Bloom properly, until I saw the claim repeated a decade later (1988, 324). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. “[I]f you were to announce that you weren’t sure about feminism, or that was something that had to be considered and critically studied, it would be as dangerous as was proclaiming you were an atheist one hundred years ago, or as bad as admitting being a communist thirty years ago” (1977, 8). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. The topic draws Bloom into a typical tangle: “These kids just do not have prejudices against anyone” (Ibid., 89), and “[n]one of their beliefs result from principle, a project, an effort” (90). Except for blacks, of course, relations with whom require “effort rather than instinct” (91). But this is essentially the fault of the blacks (92). Although “prejudices” are dead and gone, black students are “the victims of a stereotype,” but the stereotype is one “chosen by black leadership” (96). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. The cover title of *Time*’s August 12, 1991 lament on the state of American life. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. While Bloom and those more frequently viewed as politically correct travel some distance together on this matter, there are differences. For Bloom, certain words have an absolutely fixed meaning, settled at some point in the past, apparently by an informal committee of philosophers. Hence the “disproportion between what all these words *really mean* and what they mean to us is repulsive” (Ibid., 216; emphasis added). Other words have not just a fixed meaning, but an in-built *telos*: “Words that were meant to describe *and encourage* Beethoven and Goethe are now applied to every schoolchild” (183; emphasis added). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. As such, the neologism, far from a post-modernist absurdity, harkens back to an ancient piety: “Do not say of anything: ʻI will do it tomorrow,’ without adding: ʻIf Allah wills’” (*Koran* 18.23). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. The philosopher in fact is in possession of *the* truth about death, unlike religious believers, who “mythologize” the question (Ibid., 290). How in fact the philosopher knows her views on this matter to be truth, Bloom does not say. It is indeed unfortunate that Bloom did not live long enough to write his book on epistemology, which would have provided the foundation for all his other work. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. The neologism can also be expected to affect relations with the disabled, of course. As Hobbes observed, a person’s contempt and cruelty arise from a failure to imagine that “the like calamity may befall himselfe” (1968, 126). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Some will go further, and argue that free speech is not an important value at all. For Stanley Fish, “ʻ[f]ree speech’ is just the name we give to verbal behavior that serves the substantive agendas we wish to advance... Free speech, in short, is not an independent value” (1994, 102). But Fish’s position is hardly taken seriously by Fish himself: “there is some comfort and protection,” he writes, “to be found in a procedure that requires you to jump through hoops - do a lot of argumentative work - before a speech regulation will be allowed to stand” (114). But if free speech is a merely “subordinate” value (14), why should its regulation face any more hoops than the regulation of dogs? [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. “You move from extreme independence to extreme servitude, without having found, in this long space, one single place where you might stop” (Tocqueville 1986, 1:277). Tocqueville provides a rich quotation mine for the anti-politically correct, but he should be used with caution, as he hardly endorses the view that political correctness represents an unusual restraint upon the American marketplace of ideas: “I know of no country where one finds, in general, less independence of spirit and true freedom of discussion than in America” (1:381). For a list of politically incorrect topics in Tocqueville’s time, see (1:356). [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Two Canadian cases exemplify this tendency: a professor of *mathematics* published an article in his student newspaper arguing that, for today’s “boys,” “sexual intercourse must become a necessity,” hence “the reason and the need for the so-called date-rape” (Yaqzan 1993). Yaqzan had also written that Canadian Jewish organizations were a “legal Mafia” and that Jews possess an inferior ethical code (Cox 1993). Though the professor had no discernable competence in the matters on which he had chosen to write, his writings were widely defended as an expression of academic freedom.  
    In another case, a professor of chemistry came to the conclusion after various conversations with his students that those whose mothers work outside the home are more likely to cheat on exams. He used his position as guest editor of a scientific journal to include an unrefereed article detailing his conclusions, with the impressive title “Kinetics of Nonhomogeneous Processes in Human Society” (Freeman 1990). Apart from the professor’s own unsystematic observations, this scholarly piece cited just one source: Funk and Wagnall’s dictionary. Again, the professor’s actions were defended under the rubric of academic freedom. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. This gives us the key to interpret Bloom’s assertion that no professors were fired during McCarthyism: Bloom must have really meant something like “no professors, except those who exposed the university to suspicion and criticism by indulging in eccentric opinions and believing in commitment.” In the same way, a character in a G.K. Chesterton story says “[t]here was nobody there,” when precision would have dictated “there was nobody there except a postman who was beneath my notice” (1981, 68). [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. When one juxtaposes Bloom’s concept of academic freedom to Fish’s comment that free speech “is just the name we give to verbal behavior that serves the substantive agendas we wish to advance” (1994, 102), one gets the impression that various actors in the political correctness debates believe, *pace* Rosa Luxemburg, that freedom is freedom for the one who thinks similarly. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Bloom, unfortunately, does not indicate how we are to identify such individuals in the absence of an academic regime that might afford aspirants to the club some opportunity to develop their capacities in an atmosphere of freedom. One ancient thinker whom Bloom rarely cites would suggest that one must tolerate chaff if one is to harvest any wheat. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Gerald Graff complains that one party to the debate defines politics “comprehensively” while the other views it as “a narrow instrument of propaganda” (1992, 146). Indeed, even individual writers seem unsure what they mean by the term. Roger Kimball’s 200-page denunciation of “Tenured Radicals” is sub-titled “How Politics has Corrupted our Higher Education.” Only once does he provide an explicit definition of the political: “political matters - matters, I mean, involving elected officials, government policies, and the like” (1990, 95). Yet by this definition, the book as a whole is incoherent: it is simply not the case that feminists, deconstructionists, and all the other demons Kimball wishes to exorcise spend their days writing about “elected officials, government policies, and the like.” [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Children of divorce, Bloom adds, “tend to have rigid frameworks about what is right and wrong” (1988, 120). Thus, Bloom’s lengthy denunciation of student “openness” applies only to children from stable families. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Will argues, without discernable irony, that the view that literature has political content robs “literature of its authority” and authors of their role as “bestowers of meaning.” [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Arnold’s statement continues “... ulterior, political, practical considerations about ideas, which plenty of people will be sure to attach to them, *which perhaps ought often to be attached to them*, which in this country at any rate are certain to be attached to them quite sufficiently, but which criticism has really nothing to do with” (1890, 18; emphasis added). Arnold was therefore not so much attacking “ulterior, political, practical considerations” as arguing for an intellectual division of labour, within which “criticism” was to focus on the “free play of the mind on all subjects which it touches” (18). While Kimball gives the impression that Arnold’s view of criticism represents a tradition disrupted only by recent lamentable trends in literary theory, Arnold himself counterposed his view to the “old rut which [criticism] has hitherto followed in this country” (19). Thus it appears that, at some unspecified point after Arnold wrote, the bulk of academia heeded his exhortations, embracing “the Indian virtue of detachment and abandoning the sphere of practical life” (25), only to be dragged back into the soiled world of the mundane by tenured radicals.  
    Finally, since Arnold justified his injunctions with the assertion that “The mass of mankind will never have any ardent zeal for seeing things as they are” (25), is it fair to ask whether his plea for apolitical disinterestedness is itself informed by a particular political vision? [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Nor was a more narrowly-defined “politics” absent from Bloom’s classroom: in our introductory course, he frequently indulged in denunciations of those who had refused to fight in Vietnam and others who had opposed the war. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Shakespeare, Bloom argued, “was of the conviction that it is the nature of man to have varying opinions about the highest things and that such opinions become invested in doctrine and law and bound up with established interests. When confronted with one another, these opinions must quarrel. Such is life, and that must be accepted with manly resolution” (1990, 82). [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Weber is one of the most frequently mentioned authors in Bloom’s *Closing*, yet Bloom can still deliver statements straight out of some thankfully remaindered introduction to social sciences text: “if Weber was right... Marx was finished. Weber purported to demonstrate that there was no such material necessity, that men’s ʻworldviews’ or ʻvalues’ determine their history, spirit compelling matter rather than the other way around” (1988, 208). Yet Weber insisted that “it is, of course, not my aim to substitute for a one-sided materialistic an equally one-sided spiritualistic causal explanation of culture and of history” (1958, 183), and added a footnote lamenting the obtuseness of readers who failed to understand this (217).  
    Perhaps Bloom read Weber in a “Straussian” fashion, ferreting out those meanings hidden “from all but a select few” (Bloom 1990, 243) and dismissing as exoteric garb statements such as those just cited, or Weber’s assertion that the “indirect influence of social relations, institutions and groups governed by ʻmaterial interests’ extends (often unconsciously) into all spheres of culture without exception, even into the finest nuances of aesthetic and religious feeling” (1949, 65). But this surely presents a puzzle: the “esoteric” doctrine as articulated by Bloom is available to many who have not even read Weber’s work, while the exoteric doctrine that is supposed to throw sand in our eyes has escaped the notice of many commentators. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. For Gadamer, “It is only when the attempt to accept what is said as true fails that we try to ʻunderstand’ the text as the opinion of another -- psychologically or historically” (Habermas 1984, 133). This approach would separate two moments of reading. Bloom criticizes others for neglecting the first moment, but Bloom himself divides these two moments between different types of works: the “classics” are exempt from certain types of questions, questions dismissed under the rubric of “historicism,” while other works are dismissed without consideration of their validity and attributed to the *zeitgeist* in a typically historicist manner. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Bloom’s argument at least implies the question of whether a good reading of a not-so-great book is better than a slovenly reading of a great one. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. It may be objected that, on my own showing, Bloom is not representative of the anti-PC side, and that his views on academic freedom, for example, should not be used to disparage those who vigorously defend that freedom against the onslaught of political correctness. But Bloom is not the only anti-PC writer whose views on freedom are more problematic than they at first appear. Prior to his current incarnation, for example, D’Souza was rather more suspicious of freedom (Jacoby 1994, 51). More generally, one could argue that the spirit of ridicule that marks so much anti-PC writing is not indicative of a deep love of free inquiry. See, for example, Kimball (1990). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Bloom shares Fish’s view that tolerance indicates a lukewarm state of belief: he speaks of the times when “Catholics and Protestants were suspicious of and hated one another,” and adds “but at least they were taking their beliefs seriously” (1988, 35). But it is a commonplace of psychology that inner doubt is often masked by external intolerance and fanaticism. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Is it fair to batten on a single statement of Bloom’s, particularly one located at the very outset of his book? I would argue that the inability to perceive needs and beliefs in tension runs through Bloom’s entire work. Consider the “amazing power” that Bloom attributes to “abstractions”: “No one is forced to think through his practices. It is *impossible* to do so” (1988, 235; emphasis added). Thus, for Bloom, we are in the grip not just of error, but of error that is somehow contradiction-free and hence impermeable. In this account, which recalls Althusser as much as anyone, there is no hint that people might transcend the limitations inherent in their outlook through reflection upon the internal contradictions in that outlook, or contradictions between it and their lived reality. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Schumpeter, for example, who gave conditional support to the “democratic method,” did not evince much respect for the views of the average citizen, who “argues and analyzes in a way which he would readily recognize as infantile within the sphere of his real interests” (1970, 262). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. This has serious implications for Bloom’s whole view of the university. Bloom argues that the university can safely ignore values that are central in its society: since our society “levels” and “tends to blur standards in the name of equality,” the university can safely promote “high standards” and concentrate upon the “heroic” rather than the “commonplace” (1988, 253). In effect, we need to be propped up on the side towards which we lean (Tocqueville 1986, 2:93). But if contempt for ordinary people is an important ingredient in our modern cultural mix, and if that contempt is strongest among society’s most powerful members - who might well have attended Bloom’s “twenty or thirty best universities” (1988, 22) - , then Bloom has things exactly backwards.  
    In fact the supposedly paradoxical success of Bloom’s *Closing* itself points to the marketability of contempt: after all, for many readers the first third of the book (which is as far as many people got) can easily be read as a stinging attack on *someone else*. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)