
Forum

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Intolerance in the MLA

To the Editor:

Over the near decade of my subscription to *PMLA*, I have never seen anything quite like the ongoing saga of the Richard Levin controversy. For having had the gumption to speak the unspeakable—that is, for criticizing academic feminism and Marxism (in two essays, 103 [1988]: 125–38 and 105 [1990]: 491–504)—he has been subjected, in the Forum pages, to one vicious attack after another (103 [1988]: 817–18; 104 [1989]: 77–78; 106 [1991]: 314–15, 531–33, 1172–73). Of course, his critics had every right to express their disagreement with him. But rarely have they been content to stop at this; in almost every case they have loaded their artillery with rounds of insult and ad hominem abuse.

Quite clearly, Levin's real offense is not intellectual but moral: he is not mistaken but sinning. Such condemnation has, unfortunately, fallen to the lot of an ever-lengthening list of academics foolhardy enough to stray beyond the pale of currently approved political orthodoxy. Like the ancient Greeks in their practice of ostracism, the new political "elect" are showcasing their power by branding dissenters and by creating conditions of hostility that strongly militate against the participation of nonconformists in the community life of scholars. Richard Levin, as an established academic and an unusually courageous man, may be able to survive such treatment; but new scholars who need to get published and to find jobs very probably could not.

Although recent critical theory has harped unceasingly on themes of "marginalization" and "exclusion," no one is more exclusive or intolerant than those who now dominate the Modern Language Association. Such authoritarianism, though it may succeed in stifling most criticism for a time, creates a backlog of ill will and resentment that is bound to boil over in the end. Ideological critics may be winning their victories at the moment; but the more open-minded and farsighted among them should start to ask themselves whether these victories are worth the price.

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