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COMMENT AND REPLY

Comment on “Polite Culture: ‘Nice Nellyism’ Suffuses Sociology”

As someone who studies the disciplining power of “positive” and “appreciative” discourse in contemporary life, I should be delighted by Alan Sica’s polemic against Nice Nellyism in sociology (Editor’s Remarks, May, 2012). In fact, my own research has been rejected a number of times for a perceived lack of tact in what I thought was measured criticism of other scholarship. But my reaction on reading his essay was the urge to fill Professor Sica in on the more immediate social forces driving this epidemic of politeness, whose real reasons his younger reviewers were perhaps too diplomatic to state directly. There’s little need to invoke generational difference, a euphemistic “influx of ‘nice people’ into the discipline,” diversity education, or, for God’s sake, 9/11.

As Sica’s repeated mentions of gender imply, the field of sociology has become pervasively feminized (see the recently-elected ASA officers), with all that means for pay and status, just as the crumbling higher education system increasingly relies on contingent labor. In a context in which senior faculty continue to receive the generous employment benefits of earlier eras, while those of us in the lower ranks wonder how we will pay for retiree health care or send our own children to college, you might forgive us for seeming to exhibit a little class consciousness!

Sica’s “ancients” could literally afford to be impolitic, and had a blast doing it. From where I stand as an assistant professor, that acerbic privilege looks plenty appealing. I’d like to think that I carry on the serious intellectual traditions of my forebears by writing honest reviews, but I am certainly aware that today’s monographs were produced by peers trying to squeeze in quality research with overwhelming teaching and service burdens. When a new book represents a foothold on a rickety tenure ladder, the eggheaded satisfactions of a biting remark or witty takedown seem trivial at best, even

though— and it should be obvious at this point— I think they’re a lot of fun. It’s the young Nellyes’ insecurity, not our fellow-feeling, that needs fixing. Can we agree on that?

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Editor’s Reply to Lee

According to the Sage website’s magical counting system (monitoring which components of CS’s online version are being most often consulted), my “Remarks” concerning Nice Nellyism was the most often “read” item during the month it appeared. After a moment’s authorial satisfaction, this “social fact” perplexes me since in terms of substantive value, there were other essays and reviews in the May issue which warranted closer attention. Yet something in the editorial struck a small nerve. Without having kept a careful count, about a dozen of our colleagues (mostly male) wrote me to voice their positive response to the main thrust of the argument. Each more or less apologized to themselves, to me, and to the discipline for having pulled their punches in the past, and some took sustenance from the piece so that in future they will deliver more sincere appraisals of journal and book manuscripts.

Thus when Caroline Lee’s objection arrived, thereby instantiating precisely that critical attitude which “Polite Culture” was trying to instill, a certain relief made itself known—even if her complaint is partially ill-founded. Marx would second her objection, of course, revealed unforgettably in his “Preface” to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) when he was 41, reflecting on his earliest publications, at 19. He recalled being frustrated when called upon to consider materialist interests in the Rhine Province relating to “thefts of wood and parcelling of landed property” and such matters, since his education in philosophy and law could not speak to these issues

credibly. So, of course, he began a lifelong pursuit of economic knowledge. Robert Tucker wisely opened *The Marx-Engels Reader* (1972/1978) with several pages from this "Preface" since it is there that Marx clearly explained how he viewed the socio-economic world, and in quotable terms: "The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundations, on which rise a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness" (p. 4).

Naturally then, Lee's political-economic concern for "overwhelming teaching and service burdens" that beset her generation of young professors, thereby afflicted with "young Nellies' insecurity," does make it harder to express the "acerbic privilege" that she imagines the older generation could more easily publish. Yet her data may not be completely accurate. When Merton, for instance, wrote dozens of reviews, not all of them positive, before he was 30, he had no tenurable job, he was a Jew at Harvard (very tricky at the time), and his passion was the sociology of science, which he was more or less inventing as he went along. Teaching loads up to the 1970s, even at the best schools, were very heavy by today's

standards for all professors, even the seniors. Today's good fortune for Boomers at certain schools, who "buy off their courses," was rare until the 1980s, and remains so at many institutions. Tenure was also unreliable and uncertainly obtained until the 1970s. Lee's claim—"Sica's 'ancients' could literally afford to be impolitic"—is likely untrue both materially and otherwise. *Pace* Marx, the collective self-concept of many scholars today holds to a standard of civility and cautious critique that would have seemed unprincipled to the politically alert academics of the 1930s and 1950s. There is something else going on, which Lee may have voiced in an additional email she sent: "I think our difference here is that I find the sources of the positivity/civility stuff to be more insidious than primary school culture, academic politesse, etc., although of course it has trickled down to those contexts—this is coming straight from elites in the form of all kinds of explicitly conflict-averse and implicitly demobilizing interventions since the 70s in the workplace, justice system, nonprofit sector, community development, and others." One wonders if the "elites" are that smart, that powerful, and that effective. Or are we complicit?