



Chait to PC Police: Your Outrage is Like Sexy ‘Hot Wax’ to Me

After writing an article attacking the shrill liberal left, Jonathan Chait was attacked by...guess who? He’s loving every moment.

By Lloyd Grove

Jan. 28, 2015

It’s a good thing that the Internet—and not print on paper—is serving as the main forum for intellectuals, polemicists, bloggers, trolls, leftists and wingnuts to weigh in on New York magazine writer Jonathan Chait’s 4,700-word essay attacking the upsurge of political correctness and the resulting “perversion” of liberal ideals.

Otherwise, entire forests would have to be eradicated, global warming would reach catastrophic levels, the oceans would rise and drown our cities, and whatever human population remained would have to spend the next hundred years living on Soylent Green in underground bunkers.

“This has been the broadest reaction I’ve gotten to anything I’ve ever written,” Chait told The Daily Beast on Wednesday as responses to his article, titled “Not a Very P.C. Thing to Say: How the language police are perverting liberalism,” exploded on social media and countless web sites.

“I’ve never had this kind of intense feedback, and it breaks down along the lines one would generally predict. The fault line is somewhere in the middle of liberalism, with everything to the right of that being supportive and everything to the left of that being critical.”

On the supportive side is libertarian Andrew Sullivan, who—in one of his latter-day posts before ending his popular “Dish” blog “in the near future”—wrote:

“To say I stood up and cheered as I finished reading Jon Chait’s new essay on the resurgence of a toxic political correctness on the left would be an understatement.”

Ditto National Review’s Jonah Goldberg (“If he wants to fight the identity-politics Left on his own side, I say good for him”), and the Cato Institute’s Julian Sanchez (“I thought some of the vituperative online reactions to Chait’s essay showed he was on to something”).

Chait’s critics—who are apparently more numerous and vigorous on the web—include The Intercept’s Glenn Greenwald (“he tellingly focuses on the pseudo-oppression of still-influential people like himself and his journalist-friends while steadfastly ignoring the much more serious ways that people with views Chait dislikes are penalized and repressed”); The Guardian’s Jessica Valenti (“Boo-fucking-hoo. Get a real problem.”); and Talking Points Memo’s Amanda Marcotte (“Chait comes across as just as censorious and silencing as any of the leftist prigs he attempts to criticize”).

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“It’s always hard to gauge online reaction, and it’s especially hard in this instance,” Chait said, “because people are more likely to take the time to register a negative reaction versus a positive reaction. That’s human nature. It’s additionally hard in this case. I think that for some people, there’s a certain social cost to openly indicating their support. I’ve heard from some people actually saying that.”

Yet Chait claims to thrive on the thrill of public opprobrium—on, well, not exactly being burned at the stake, but on holding his hand over the candle flame and getting slightly singed.

“I didn’t have any trepidation because I’m unusual in my actual liking for negative feedback,” he said. “I actually enjoy being criticized. So if someone says, ‘You wrote this brave thing,’ I’m not being modest when I tell you, ‘No, it’s not brave. It’s really not.’ It’s like saying to a sadomasochist, ‘You’re so brave to endure those whippings and that hot wax being poured on your chest.’ But this is something that I do because it’s a lifestyle. I enjoy it—only metaphorically, of course.”

In his magazine piece, Chait, who describes himself as an unreconstructed liberal, argues that a recent reemergence of P.C. language-policing in academic, intellectual and political circles—frequently, he claims through various examples, by doctrinaire and race-conscious feminists on the ideological left—has created a

totalitarian atmosphere of intolerance that damages the free expression of non-P.C. ideas necessary to healthy democratic discourse.

Not surprisingly, Chait's detractors (and even a defender or two, along with the author himself) have pointed out that he is a privileged white male whose work is regularly featured in a prestigious and popular magazine.

Thus, in a representative reproach, The Guardian's Valenti mocks Chait as "a writer...[who] feels it necessary to whine in print about his and other (mostly well-remunerated) writers' inability to write offensive tripe without consequence..."

For all his love of pushing other people's buttons, Chait stoutly protests this analysis of his motives—"the idea that my piece is about 'poor me, poor me. Let's pity me.'"

Chait added: "That's very alarming to me, and that's the line almost everyone is taking—that I'm writing a piece about how hard it is for me to be a white male. Which is not what the piece says at all. I didn't put in the piece that I feel persecuted. It didn't occur to me to write that I don't feel persecuted. Of course I'm not a persecuted figure! I enjoy an incredibly fortunate life. I get to write for a fantastic magazine. I'm in no way victimized by this movement."

Chait said he has been thinking about the phenomenon of political correctness since he was a student more than two decades ago at the University of Michigan (one of the college campuses where the P.C. movement was having a heyday), and it was his editors at New York who pitched him the idea for the essay.

"I was in college during the height of the first craze, which went away pretty quickly, but defined the atmosphere and prompted me to think through the paradox of being a liberal in a political environment defined by the P.C. Left," Chait said. "It was really formative for me, and I never stopped thinking of myself as a liberal...I've been thinking about this for awhile and I took quite a bit of time putting the piece together."

Chait said that, much to his surprise, he even found valid observations in the 1992 book *Illiberal Education: Political Correctness and the College Experience*—a seminal study of the P.C. movement authored by right-wing martyr (owing to a felony conviction on campaign finance violations) Dinesh D'Souza, these days a notorious Obama-hating conspiracy theorist.

"It's really hard to say this out loud. He is such a vile, bizarre character," Chait said about D'Souza's reputation today. "There's a lot of useful reporting in that book—I think before he went completely off the rails, he was on to something. He's not somebody whose world view I would ever imagine sharing. And if I

hadn't read that book, I'd think that person is crazy and there's no way he could have ever made a useful contribution to human knowledge."

Now Chait, perhaps weirdly, is attracting similar critiques.