

Black Teachers for Black Studies?

A Philosophical Critique of Multiculturalist Pedagogy

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On a recent TV talk show, one discussant said that only black people are competent to teach the history of black people. His displays of contempt for his opponent suggested that he thought his proposition beyond reasonable dispute. Why did he think so? Because, he said, only a black person knows the pain that black people have suffered. Variants on this argument—I call it the “argument from black pain”—are the foundation stones of the “multiculturalism” that is currently regnant in our centers of learning, where it now counts as axiomatic that only women are qualified to teach about women, only homosexuals about homosexuals, only Hispanics about Hispanics, and so on. Why do multiculturalists think so? Because, it is said, only a person of kind and condition X can have the experiences of a person or peoples of kind and condition X.

Anyone who has recently spent time in a university knows what this line of thinking has wrought. Multiculturalism has Balkanized our campuses, producing mutually antagonistic ghettos of blacks, Hispanics, and other groups. Having chosen segregation from their fellow students, these groups contribute to the common culture only an angry sense of alienation and wounded hostility—an attitude that precludes not

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just friendship but even day-to-day fellowship with others, despite what you may have been told to the contrary. Thus, “minorities” admitted to the university on the basis of separate standards go through separate orientations, live in separate dorms, eat in separate areas of the cafeteria, enroll in separate courses, join separate social clubs, attend separate graduation ceremonies, and go their separate ways afterward. Thus, the Office of Student Life instructs blacks, Hispanics, females, and Native Americans about their special rights and warns white males of their special duties. Thus, feminists and blacks make anonymous complaints to the Office for Sexual and Racial Harassment regarding the “insensitivity” of their white male professors, who, being deemed insufficiently sympathetic to their way of thinking, are compelled to attend Chinese communist-style reeducation camps euphemistically described as workshops. Thus, homosexuals have gay-day parades not as pleas for tolerance or expressions of amity but as aggressive gestures of disdain for more conventional sexual behavior and for those who prefer it. And so on. Demonstrations on behalf of peace are common on today’s campuses, but they occur in an atmosphere of tension and conflict. Civility has become a thing of the past.

The Argument Proves Too Much

When you consider how far these developments have gone, any attempt to counter them may amount to closing the barn door after the horse has escaped. Now that the issue has reached the talk shows, however, perhaps we should begin to point out the obvious—that the argument from black pain proves too much, even for multiculturalists. If it were sound, nobody could teach anybody else’s history because no person has lived another person’s life. Thus, nobody presently alive could teach the history of ancient Greece or Rome, all of whose citizens have been dead for some two millennia. Similarly, nobody we know could teach the history of monarchy in France because nobody we know has ever *been* a monarch in France. And, to come closer to the issue at hand, nobody could teach the history of slavery in antebellum America because no living person *was* a slave in that era. If the argument from black pain proves that whites cannot teach black history, it is because it proves that nobody, including blacks, can teach black history—hardly the desired conclusion.

The argument has this untenable implication because it is based on a false principle. If it is necessary to be an X in order to teach about an X, an African cannot inform us about a European, and a European cannot teach us about an Asian. In fact, one Asian, European, or African cannot teach us about another. To teach about the Chinese you will need to be from China; a citizen of Japan or Korea would not be up to the job. Even a person from China will not do if she comes from the wrong region. To give instruction about the people of Shanghai, she will have to hail from Shanghai. Indeed, to instruct us about a particular neighborhood or house, she will have to be from that very neighborhood or house. As nobody in the present could teach about anybody in the past, so no person from one place could teach about people from another. Geography is ruled out along with history.

Nor is that the end. No person born and reared in one social or economic class has had the experiences of a person born and reared in a different class. If the argument from black pain were right, it would follow that no person of *any* class could ever understand and explain people of a *different* class—which means that nobody could compare one socioeconomic class to another. There goes sociology. For an analogous reason, cultural anthropology would be ruled out, too. No anthropologist knows what it feels like to *be* one of the people she has chosen to study, even if she has lived with them for a while. Because she has had different experiences, she will necessarily be incompetent to understand theirs—which means that comparative anthropology must be regarded as a futile waste of time. So, by the same token, must be other behavioral sciences.

In general, because it is impossible for A to *be* or to *become* B, it will be impossible for A to have or to have had B's experiences, which means that it will be impossible for A to understand and talk with authority about B. If multiculturalism were right, we would all be doomed to mutual incomprehension. Universal solipsism would be our inescapable fate.

The Argument Is Obviously Mistaken

Fortunately, the multiculturalist argument could not be more wrong. Misunderstanding of one person or group by another is certainly common enough, but it is not inevitable, for two obvious and weighty reasons. First, despite the multiculturalists' belief to the contrary, we are really not all that different from each other. If you pinch your finger or suffer unfair treatment, I (who also have a finger and have sometimes been mistreated) have a pretty good idea how you feel. Second, we manage daily to understand people who are quite unlike us. Frequently, in fact, one person understands another better than he understands himself. The good mother knows her child better than the child does; the long-suffering wife anticipates her grumpy husband's moods better than he does; the trained psychologist knows the minds of her confused patients better than they know their own minds; the successful politician understands the prejudices of her constituents better than they do; the calculating salesman has a clearer view of his customer's wishes than the customer himself does; the experienced teacher knows his pupil's confusion better than the pupil does; the literary critic has a better grasp of the author's thought than the author does; and so on endlessly. Why in heaven's name should a white person *not* be able to understand a black one or vice versa?

It is, of course, clear enough that to have an X's experiences you must be an X. As we have just seen, however, to understand and teach about X you do not need to have had X's experiences. Furthermore, having had such experiences might not help. Being a child or insane does not make you an expert on children or on insanity, and becoming more childlike or insane will not confer expertise on you. Notoriously, the man whose brain is afflicted with Alzheimer's disease is the last person to know it; his familiarity with his condition does not suffice to make him knowledgeable about it.

Only he knows how it feels; only his physician understands why. According to Sigmund Freud, the neurotic patient does not understand his neurosis; that is why he needs a psychoanalyst. According to Marx and Engels, members of the proletariat do not know how the capitalists are exploiting them; left to themselves, they are not even conscious that they belong to a distinctive class. That is why “the workers’ revolution” has always had to be led by intellectuals, who, ironically enough, have never been able to get the workers to go along.

One does not have to be a Freudian or a Marxist to see that we are very often the last persons to understand ourselves. The people who lived in ancient Greece would have had greater familiarity with the place and with each other, but Norwood Russell Hanson probably understands their civilization better than they did, and he is certainly in a better position to tell us about it. Being too close to a thing sometimes makes it more difficult to see; so does emotional involvement. Distance—and difference—can give a better perspective. Hence, an observant and disinterested foreigner can understand a place better than its own citizens do. The most perceptive book ever written about ordinary Americans—Alexis de Toqueville’s *Democracy in America*—was the work of a French aristocrat. Princeton scholar Bernard Lewis understands the Middle East better than most Middle Easterners do, Edward Said’s view to the contrary notwithstanding—not because Lewis *is* an Arab, but because he has spent a lifetime learning about Arabs. Professorships of X should be reserved for people who know something about X. Whether or not they also happen to be Xs or from X is irrelevant.

The Objective Is Power, Not Enlightenment

At one time, this principle would have been regarded as too obvious to state at all, much less emphasized at such length, phrased in so many ways, and illustrated so profusely. Why is it not now acknowledged by the multiculturalist?

Because the multiculturalist’s real interest is not pedagogy but power, not teaching but advocacy, not the history of the past but the politics of the present, and not qualification for the job but occupational preference for her crowd. The multiculturalist has no desire to improve the teaching of black history. What she wants is to reserve jobs for people who will support her cause. Feminists and homosexuals who endorse multiculturalism have similar motives. They want courses about women and homosexuals to be taught by feminists and homosexuals, not because they want these courses to be taught more objectively and dispassionately, but because they want to enlist more women and homosexuals in their party. Despite a widespread impression to the contrary, multiculturalism is not a plea for less bias in teaching; it is a plea for a different, more pronounced, and more doctrinaire bias. Professors are to be made into ministers of propaganda; instruction is to become indoctrination.

Multiculturalists do not apologize for this stance or even try to hide it. In their well-advertised way of thinking, all observation is interpretation, and all interpre-

tation is distortion. Therefore, no one can hope to arrive at a picture of anything that depicts it as it is in itself, apart from the observer's values and biases. In the multiculturalist's view, a hope for intellectually honest description and objective analysis is necessarily misguided; the possibility that it might ever be achieved is a myth. Having been fostered by the unwarranted confidence of white males in the superiority of their own highly jaundiced point of view, this myth must be countered by reserving positions on the faculty for people of the contrary persuasion. In short, indoctrination being what the multiculturalist thinks the other side does, she has decided to do it, too.

The Epistemology of Political Correctness

This doctrine of interpretation, which is the bedrock of the kind of orthodoxy known as *political correctness*, is premised on a cynical and radical epistemology, the essence of which is rejection of the concept of truth, for which the multiculturalist substitutes "points of view"—each of which, she says, has its own "truth." (Those who wish to seem more sophisticated call these points of view *paradigms*—Thomas Kuhn's term for a different idea.) In other words, the multiculturalist maintains that there is no such thing as truth, just so many diverse opinions, each true in the opinion of the person or group that has it, none true absolutely. Thus, instead of simple truth, there is "white truth" and "black truth," "female truth" and "male truth," "gay truth" and "straight truth," and so forth. Because all opinions are fallible and imperfect, the multiculturalist holds that all of them are worthless, so equally good; spherical earthism is no better than flat earthism, chiropody is no better than chiropractic. Facts have nothing to do with anything. It is all "socially constructed" lies; so you may pick the lie you like best, confident that it will be no worse than anybody else's.

Multicultural belief in the impossibility of transcending your "point of view" applies in particular to your moral and political preferences. In the multiculturalist view, these preferences color the world that you see because they tint the glasses through which you view it. So moral and political neutrality—an untinted view of things—cannot be achieved. Social scientists and historians who think that they have achieved such a view have merely mistaken for reality the subjective color that their own prejudices have imparted to things. Such people pride themselves on describing the world as it is, neither praising it nor condemning it, but the multiculturalist believes that they are fooling themselves. In the multiculturalist's way of thinking, failure to condemn amounts to approval; impartiality represents endorsement.

Though this doctrine is widely espoused in contemporary departments of humanities and endorsed in some departments of social science, it is both insincere and incoherent. Whatever you believe, you necessarily believe to be true, and you believe to be false whatever contradicts your belief. Thus, to believe that the earth is spherical is to believe that it is *true* that the earth is spherical—not just in your opinion but as a matter of fact, no matter that the flat earthers think otherwise. "That the

earth is flat is true from *his* point of view, but it is not true” makes sense; “That the earth is spherical is true from *my* point of view, but it is not true” does not make sense. So, the multiculturalist, despite her protestations to the contrary, believes not only that there is such a thing as truth, but also that it attaches to her beliefs alone, not to her opponents’ beliefs as well. By claiming otherwise, she is merely trying to ward off criticism. She thinks that others will be diverted from condemning her opinions as false if she does not claim that they are true, but, for the reason just given, her dodge will not work. You refute yourself if you say in effect, “Here is a truth; there is no truth,” or “Here is a better opinion; no opinions are better than any others.”

The Possibility of Knowing the Truth

Given the incoherence of multiculturalist epistemology, it is no wonder that there are flaws in the visual metaphor that is its usual support. Contrary to this metaphor, we *can* know what something is like in itself, *apart from any point of view*. Consider a coin. It looks flat and thin from one point of view, round from another. We would be mistaken, however, to conclude that the coin has no shape of its own or that we cannot know what it is. In fact, as we all know, the coin has the shape of a very short cylinder. We would also be mistaken to conclude that because the shape of the coin varies with point of view, it is flat in one point of view, round in another. From the point of view of an astigmatic, the coin appears bleary, but it is not. What changes with a change in point of view is the coin’s *appearance*, not its *shape*. Appearance and opinion are relative; reality and truth are not.

Of course, politics and economics are more complicated than the geometry of shapes, and no one will be so foolish as to say that social scientists and humanists have achieved the same degree of objectivity as mathematicians or physicists. Indeed, there is probably no such thing as a political or moral belief that is uninfected by some degree of self-serving bias. Regarding human affairs, complete impartiality exists mainly as an ideal to be sought, not as an achievement to be celebrated. Furthermore, even where interpretations of events are disinterested, they are also almost certainly riddled with error, if only because the world is complicated and human beings are fallible. Nevertheless, we do sometimes manage to view things more dispassionately in order to distinguish what *is* true from what we wish were true or what we fear to be true. Furthermore, miracle though it may seem from a multiculturalist point of view, we do sometimes get things right; so disagreement does not always reduce to a difference in opinions. Of course, objectivity is easier to attain in mathematics and physics than in the social sciences and humanities, but even in these areas progress can be and has been made. So even though we can grant that every claim is subject to critical appraisal, wholesale condemnation of the findings of history, sociology, and other human sciences cannot be justified.

Unfortunately, wholesale condemnation is all the multiculturalist knows. Because every interpretation of human affairs is imperfect, the multiculturalist con-

cludes that all interpretations are worthless (a very different proposition) and declares her right to prefer another despite her inability to show that it is better. Grant that nobody knows the final truth—the truth that will emerge after suitably prolonged inquiry and mutual criticism. It still does not follow that all opinions are equally worthless or that mine are as good and true as yours. On the contrary, because some opinions clearly come closer to the truth, given the evidence on hand, we may reasonably hope that continued inquiry and openness to correction will enable us to approach the absolute truth even more closely. Denial that anybody possesses a monopoly on the truth is justified; denial of the very possibility of discovering truth is a self-defeating counsel of despair.

The Multicultural Curriculum: Marxism in a New Key

The multicultural curriculum grows out of this despair. Teaching normally has one or more of the following aims: to transmit information; to develop skills; to impart attitudes. Transmitting information requires telling the truth, which the multiculturalist has (insincerely and incoherently) declared to be impossible. So even if it is necessarily multiculturalists' real aim, telling the truth cannot be their professed aim. Multiculturalists therefore must wish either to develop skills or to inculcate attitudes. But if the aim were to inculcate skill, what skill would that be? For example, in the teaching of history, is the aim to develop the skills of scholarship? Postulate with the multiculturalist that truth does not exist and cannot be known. It follows immediately that truth cannot be discovered. So there can be no need for the skills of historical scholarship, the sole use of which is to discover it. We are left with nothing but the desire to impart attitudes. That must be the object of multicultural teaching.

What attitude does the multiculturalist want to impart? The answer is revealed in the original phrasing of the argument from black pain. As John McWhorter pointed out on the talk show mentioned earlier, blacks in America have experienced much more than pain; they also have had unprecedented opportunity and success. Unfortunately, this fact, plain though it may be, would not fit into the worldview of McWhorter's multiculturalist opponent, for whom the history of black people was merely a story of pain. Moreover, this opponent's attitude is typical. As Marx maintained that the story of mankind is about how the rich have exploited the poor, the multiculturalist maintains that the story of mankind is about how whites have oppressed blacks, men have dominated women, heterosexuals have persecuted homosexuals, and Europeans have lorded it over non-Europeans. In short, multicultural history is about how a few have victimized everybody else. Not trusting "the oppressors" to tell this story; the multiculturalist wants "the oppressed" to tell it.

Or so she says. On the ground, the fact is different. In the final analysis, what the multiculturalist wants is not merely that the story of oppression be told by those she deems to be its victims, but also that it be told on their behalf. As we know from

multicultural practice in the universities, it is not just whites who must be excluded from the classrooms where black history and sociology are to be taught. If possible, blacks who think like Thomas Sowell, John McWhorter, or Walter Williams also must be kept away. Not just men must be kept from becoming professors of women's studies; also excluded must be such women as Christina Hoff Sommers, Camille Paglia, and Lynne Cheney. Not just heterosexuals must be denied chairs in the study of homosexuals; also to be disqualified are such reputed homosexual conservatives as Andrew Sullivan. The multiculturalist demand is for blacks and females and homosexuals *who will teach that blacks and females and homosexuals are victims*. Multiculturalists promote diversity of teachers, but they leave no room for diversity of opinion. In fact, they tolerate only one opinion—their own.

The reader will have noticed that I have described a *single*, not a *multiple*, point of view. What happened to the unique outlooks of women, homosexuals, Hispanics, and blacks? Where in the multiculturalist scheme are the special experiences that enable each group to make its particular contribution to understanding the human situation? The simple but correct answer is “nowhere.” Despite talk of a diversity of perspectives, there is no room in multiculturalism for a multiplicity of views. Multiculturalism is a single melody—the melody of Marxism—played in different keys by different instruments. Thus, where Marx talked about economic classes, the new multiculturalists talk about sex, race, age, religion, ethnicity, haircut, diet, style of dress, and anything else that they can use to place human beings in opposition to one another.

An Unshakable Faith

Given this highly tendentious and socially poisonous doctrine, which is an unshakeable faith for its adherents, inequalities of wealth and power are always the products of exploitation of innocent persons by guilty ones, never the result of differences in ability, effort, luck, biology, temperament, preference, culture, geography, or accident. If men have more authority, it must be because they have overpowered weaker and more submissive women. If whites are wealthier, it must be because they have stolen the wealth that should have gone to people of color. If the rest of the world outside America is financially and politically worse off, it must be because America has expropriated the wealth that belonged to others. No other explanation can be allowed. Every contrary hypothesis is ruled out in advance, on moral grounds alone, because it would amount to “blaming the victim,” never mind the facts.

Because this divisive and destructive doctrine is a faith, it is impervious to disconfirming evidence, plentiful though that evidence is. The true multicultural believer sees only what seems to her to confirm her previously settled conviction. Thus, the fact that some people indeed have gained by exploiting others is taken to prove that wealth is always a sign of exploitation, never of work, aptitude, skill, and prudent management. That there is countervailing evidence on every hand carries no weight. The multiculturalist is simply unwilling to see that evidence—and, as Heraclitus

observed two millennia ago, there are none so blind as those who will not see. Like the theologian who attributes everything that happens—no matter whether it be good or bad—to “the will of God,” the multiculturalist will allow nothing to count against her dogma, and she will never understand that her dogma appears to explain everything only because in fact it explains nothing. Instead, confident that she knows the world’s dirty little secret, she will campaign for more governmentally sanctioned and subsidized pulpits from which to proclaim it.

This program, which has been gaining momentum for three decades and continues unabated today, threatens the integrity of American universities, the glory of which has always been their special commitment to discovering and disseminating truth without trimming it to suit the interests of special groups. This hard-earned devotion to truth, a product of the Enlightenment reaction against uncritical and unthinking faith, is the source of the great prestige and influence of Western centers of learning. It is why they are filled not only with Westerners, but also with students from every part of the globe. Multiculturalist efforts to take over whole departments and schools in order to use them for the political ends of special groups while disregarding—no, while rejecting the very concept of—truth in order to tell politically convenient lies can only diminish both the standing and the authority of the institutions that permit or encourage these efforts.

Multiculturalists, who reject the traditional aims of the university, mean to co-opt it for their own very different ends. We should not be surprised, then, that to the extent to which they have had their way with the university—and they have indeed permeated almost every corner—they have corrupted it, as they always intended. How long will they be allowed to continue?

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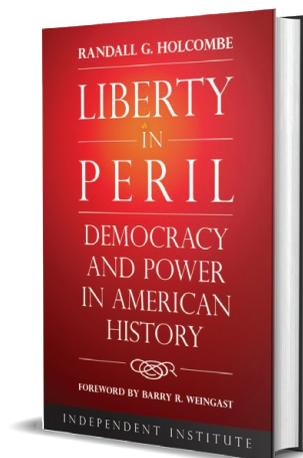
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