

Critical Theory in the American University: A Critical Issue

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I teach a university course in education taken by undergraduate liberal arts students--they aren't education majors--who take the course as an elective. It focuses on contemporary elementary and secondary public schooling and, to a lesser extent, the circumstance in universities. Among the required readings this semester (fall, 2013) are sections of a book edited by James Noll, a retired professor of education, entitled *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Educational Issues*.¹ The Noll book is made up of twenty-three contemporary schooling issues as Noll defines them, each phrased in the form of a question. For each issue/question, Noll writes an introduction and then includes two articles he has chosen from the professional literature in education to represent Yes and No answers to the question, thus creating a debate format. Noll ends each issue with a concluding statement, which includes further readings on this concern.

Noll has done a good job with the book, and I find it useful in my course. I want my students to realize that there isn't just one right answer to the issues we confront in education (or in anything else, for that matter), that depending on their particular outlooks and values, thoughtful and informed people legitimately differ both as to what is going on in schools and what ought to go on in them. Grounded in that realization, students, I hope, feel invited to analyze and assess arguments and explore their differences and implications, contribute their own best thinking to making sense of the issue, and come to their own conclusions rather than remain uncritical note-taking consumers of the ideas and proposals of others, which unfortunately is too often the role students play in university courses.

A Noll issue I used this semester he titled "Does a 'Deficit Model' Serve Poor Children Well?"² It is clear from Noll's introductory comments and the two opposing arguments that poor or poverty to these writers means African American students in urban public schools. By deficit, Noll is referring to lack of health care, exposure to crime and drugs, negative adult role models, family instability, and limited exposure to culturally uplifting experiences.

The Yes argument is an article by Ruby Payne called “Nine Powerful Practices,” first published in the prestigious professional journal *Educational Leadership*.³ Payne is the president of her own company which generates and dispenses ideas for how schools can overcome what she perceives as limiting factors, particularly cultural, in poor children’s lives—again, the tacit, and at times explicit, reference is to blacks. She gives talks and workshops in the schools, provides consultant help, makes media appearances, authors short writings such as this one in the Noll book, and has written several books, including “Under-Resourced Learners: 8 Strategies to Boost Student Achievement.”⁴

In the “Nine Powerful Practices” article Noll chose to include, Payne begins:

Students from families with little formal education often learn rules about how to speak and behave, and acquire knowledge that conflicts with how learning happens in school. They also come to school with less background knowledge and fewer family supports. Formal schooling, therefore, may present challenges to students living in poverty. Teachers need to recognize these challenges and help students to overcome them. In my work consulting with schools that serve a large population of students living in poverty, I have found nine interventions particularly helpful in raising achievement for low-income students.⁵

She then goes on to list the nine interventions, among them teaching students to speak in a formal register, helping them learn the hidden rules of school, and teaching students to ask questions.

The No article, “Poverty and Payne,” written by two professors of education—we don’t need to name their university in this context--Mistilina Sato and Timothy J. Lensmire, was originally published in another top rank education journal, *Phi Delta Kappan*.⁶ The authors criticize Payne for negatively stereotyping the poor (that is to say, African Americans). They charge that Payne’s “deficit” perceptions reflect racial insensitivity if not outright white racism. Better than Payne’s “fix the inferiors” approach, contend Sato and Lensmire, is to ground schooling practices in these children’s cultural competence, to center instruction on what is right about them rather than what is wrong or incomplete about

them in the eyes of a racially and culturally insensitive white educator.

A big part of paving the way to the implementation of this more advisable strategy, write Sato and Lensmire, is white teachers and prospective teachers coming to understand their own racial identities and how they affect their work in the classroom with non-white students—again, the referent is African Americans. The authors note that in this regard they engage their white teacher education students with critical whiteness studies, as they term it. They mention two books particularly useful in this undertaking: David Roediger's edited volume, *Black on White: Black Writers on What It means to be White*, and Rev. Thandeka's *Learning to Be White: Money, Race, and God in America*.⁷

I don't know professors Sato or Lensmire personally, and I'm not familiar with their writings, but going by the information about themselves they provide in their faculty website pages, I conclude that even though Professor Sato is the lead author of their article (the first name listed, which implies that this writer was more greatly responsible for its content), Professor Lensmire was the major force in this writing. I'm sure that Professor Sato concurs with what's in this piece, but these are Professor Lensmire's ideas I believe, and it's him I focus on in this writing. I use his example as a vehicle for the consideration of a pattern of thought and behavior prevalent currently in American universities across the board. To get into this consideration, I need to set out some context, so that's next.

Historically, the American university has been viewed as a place of free and open inquiry and expression and debate, for both students and faculty; academic freedom and individual autonomy and integrity have been cherished ideals. The university has been seen as a marketplace of ideas, as it were, a setting in which competing perspectives and explanations and proposals are encouraged, acknowledged, explored, discussed, and debated. Within this perspective, philosophical and ideological pluralism, or diversity, and personal autonomy and intellectual integrity, are guiding principles. Exemplary excellence, exceptionality--groundbreaking insight, creativity, freshness of analysis and discovery--is a supreme value. A university is where people don't have to think alike or be alike or feel compelled to subordinate themselves to some cause or

mission. Rather, it is a context in which to push with all that's in you to be top-of-the-line academically in your own unique way and to express the outcomes of that process and be heard and respectfully taken into account by others. The university is not to be in the business of stamping out cookie-cutter people, students or faculty.

With regard to race—and other matters as well, but I'll stick to race here—that conception of the university doesn't hold in our time. And here is where the theoretical work of Robert Jay Lifton is useful. Lifton is an American psychiatrist, scholar still active in his mid-eighties and the author of a recently published memoir.⁸ He first became known to the general public as a young man for his studies of mind control during the Korean War—the coercive practices used with American prisoners of war by the Chinese with embarrassing effectiveness, methods that came to be known popularly as brainwashing.

Lifton coined the term *totalism* to describe ideologies and orientations that justify gaining control over the thoughts and behaviors of masses, or at least large numbers, of people. The concept of totalism rings of totalitarian political arrangements, but Lifton uses the term to get across the idea that it is not just governments that are involved with this kind of thing. So don't just think of Stalin and Hitler and Mao; think also of non-governmental organizations, like religious sects and, well, your local university.

Totalism involves the fervent commitment to get everybody working harmoniously together in alignment with your vision and in service to your ends. A totalist outlook goes beyond simply arguing for your position and agenda, trying to persuade people, making your case to them, selling them on your ideas and ways, and accepting the idea that individuals and groups might not buy your product. Totalism supports arranging people's lives, managing and controlling their circumstances and experiences and rewards and punishments, so that they *will* see the light, your light, and enthusiastically get with the program, your program. Part of this is making sure competing "products" to yours are demonized or silenced to the point that you can in effect operate a monopoly. One feature that characterizes totalism is an edge, a tension, an atmosphere of intimidation. The idea gets across that if people have problems with what's going on, they'd best keep that to themselves.⁹

Who would feel compelled to adopt this way of educating

students—or training, or indoctrinating, or conditioning them, pick your term? People convinced beyond a doubt that they possess Truth and Morality and feel duty bound to bring the world into alignment with it, and in the process eradicate ignorance and evil and injustice and those that uphold it. What are some historical examples of people like this getting in charge of universities? The Soviet Union under Stalin comes to mind, and German universities in the 1930s under the National Socialists, and Chinese universities under Mao. And who might be prone to operate in this fashion in our time? Educators that reflect an ideology and approach called *critical theory* or *critical pedagogy*.

Critical theory, critical pedagogy, has been an increasingly prominent perspective on schooling for four decades or more in universities, to the point that it is now the predominant ideological underpinning in the social sciences and humanities, education, social work, and the field of higher education. The key to understanding this outlook and methodology is to note the term *critical*. This orientation focuses on what it considers salient in Western culture and society, its injustices: racism, sexism, classism, poverty, economic disparity, the oppression of poor and non-white people, capitalist exploitation, imperialism, and political power in the hands of the powerful few who rig the system to serve their own selfish interests. Critical theory and its practitioners are intensely critical of all that, and they are committed to radically changing it for the better through their work in education.¹⁰

The goal of critical pedagogy is, the short hand term for it, *social justice*. With America as the referent, social justice means:

- *De-Europeanizing America*, which emphasizes de-Christianizing and “de-WASPing” it. The idea of diversity is a good cover for that endeavor.

- *Collectivizing America*. Americans are too individualistic and private. They need to develop a group consciousness. They have to think of *all of us* rather than *me and those close to me*, put the needs and interests of the impersonal collective above their narrow concern for themselves and their families and churches and communities.

- *Equalizing America*. Power and wealth are in two few hands, and more than that, in the wrong hands; it needs to be redistributed. Bring the top down and the bottom--that is, minorities and the

poor—up.

• *Democratizing America*. Democracy empowers the collective, and especially the government that does its bidding, over the individual *par excellence*. In a democracy, individuals must defer to the dictates of the collective in just about any area you can name. While democracy is linked to freedom, it is the freedom of the group to do whatever it wants. Everything put up for a vote denies individuals the freedom to direct their lives with regard to that matter; they must do what the group dictates. Our federal constitutional republic--which we pledge allegiance to at ballgames--with its limited and prescribed governmental prerogatives and emphasis on individual rights and freedoms as codified in the Bill of Rights to the Constitution gets in the way of collective domination. With a democracy, whoever can control the collective--through education, the media, interest group activity, demagoguery, and rewards and punishments--can get about the business of reordering matters in the right, that is to say, social justice, direction.

Critical pedagogy is basically a neo-Marxist orientation--neo as in new, updated. Where the old Marxism emphasized an uprising of the working classes, the new Marxism emphasizes a transformation in the minds of both oppressed people and their oppressors (oppressed-and-oppressors is the primary interpretive lens of neo-Marxists). Schools can help both groups to understand the realities of the world and in their own lives, and this will prompt both to create a more equitable cultural and social circumstance.

Central in this undertaking, young people from privileged backgrounds and circumstances will learn in schools at all levels, and especially in universities, of the misdeeds of their ancestors and the residue of that which resides in the contemporary circumstance and in their own individual lives, and this awareness will awaken them to their moral obligation to transform the world to align with what their heightened consciousness shows them is needed. This new Marxism revolution, then, is not so much the outcome of working class solidarity and action as it is the actions of educated middle and upper class people prompted and guided by insights and ideals they attain in the schools they attend. Teachers within this frame are no less than political revolutionaries. Their mission is to transform the world.

There is a distinct racial dimension to all of this, and to get at that it helps to survey the writings a group of Marxist intellectuals

collectively known as the Frankfurt School of Intellectuals. They were called that because many of them were at the University of Frankfurt in Germany in the 1930s. They fled the National Socialists and came to America and, a good number of them, became affiliated with Columbia University in New York City.

Among the prominent members of the Frankfurt School were Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse. These men were active from the 1940s to '60s and their prose is as dry as dust, and just about nobody these days has heard of them, but their ideas have filtered through to our time and informed today's critical educators.¹¹

Jewish, the Frankfurt School intellectuals drew what they viewed as a lesson from what happened in Germany when white gentiles became racially and culturally self-conscious and cohesive, and they sought to prevent that catastrophe from re-occurring in their new homeland and in the Europe of their birth. In their writings, they depicted white gentiles as authoritarian, oppressive and exploitive of non-whites, racist, anti-Semitic, and prone to aggression and violence. Their goal, though it remained largely tacit in their public expressions, was to diminish the power of white gentiles by painting a very negative picture of them, including in the minds of white gentiles themselves. The basic idea: non-white gentiles have a problem, and that problem is white gentiles.

To put it simply, critical theory embodies a villainous view of white gentiles. An illustration, Peter McLaren, a professor of education at UCLA, one of the most prominent representatives of critical pedagogy in our time, was asked by an interviewer, "How do you come to terms with your own whiteness?" McLaren replied, "My whiteness is something I cannot escape no matter how hard I try. I come to terms with my whiteness by living my own life as a traitor to whiteness. I cannot become lazy. If all whites are racists at some level, then we must struggle to become anti-racist racists."¹² All to say, if a word association test were given in a successfully run class by a critical pedagogue, and students, including and especially white students, were asked to write down ten words they associate with white people and whiteness, all ten would be harshly negative.

A last point, one other legacy of the Frankfurt school worthy of mention in this context is the justification for enforcing tight control of the public discourse--the idea flow, the dialogue--in educational settings. There are not two sides to the matters critical pedagogues

care about; there is but one proper, or correct, side. It makes no sense to allow those who represent untruth and malevolence to spew their venom in schools. Marcuse in particular argued forcefully that the oppressors in universities employ notions of free inquiry, the encouragement and support for all sides of a matter to be investigated, aired, and debated, academic freedom, and intellectual autonomy to cloud the minds of students and defuse their commitment to do what needs to be done, and to maintain power for themselves. They can't be allowed to persist in their misguided and evil ways. As the slogan goes, no free speech for fascists.¹³ Those who would impede the needed transformation of society are to be marginalized, silenced, and, if at all possible, excluded from the university. The challenge for university educators, all educators, is not to present contrasting sides to students but rather the true and right side. The goal of social justice trumps all other considerations.

It's clear from Professor Lensmire's self-description on his university web page that he falls into the critical theory camp. "I embrace and continue to learn about and explore various progressive, feminist, and critical pedagogies in my work with students." "My current research and writing focus on race and education, and especially on how white people learn to be white in our white supremacist society. Grounded in critical whiteness studies, my work contributes to the ongoing effort to figure out how best to work with white students (in K-12 schools and universities, in teacher education, in teacher development) on issues of race and social justice." Among the courses Professor Lensmire teaches at the university is one called Critical Pedagogy. His professional writings include the articles "Laughing White Men," "Ambivalent White Racial Identities: Fear and An Elusive Innocence," "A Critical Pedagogy of Race in Teacher Education," "What Teacher Education Can Learn from Blackface Minstrelsy," and "How I Became White While Punching De Tar Baby." ("Punching de tar baby," derived from an old Uncle Remus folk tale, refers to a "sticky situation" that is only aggravated by continued involvement, and tar baby is at times taken to be a pejorative term for blacks.)

With this last section as a backdrop, now to those writers that the Sato and Lensmire article referred to as being useful in understanding white cultural identity, David Roediger and Rev.

Thandeka (she is often referred to simply as Thandeka, no title or first name).

Roediger, white, is a professor of African American studies at the University of Illinois. He is a leading voice in the white abolitionist movement, as it is called: "It is not merely that whiteness is oppressive and false," he asserts, "it's that whiteness is nothing but oppressive and false." As does McClaren, Roediger proposes that whites become "race traitors."¹⁴ He is best known for his book, *Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class*.¹⁵ In it, he draws on Marxist ideology and psychoanalysis to sketch the development of racism in the American white working class during the nineteenth century. The book is arguably legitimate academic scholarship. That said, it does come down to portraying blacks as victims and painting white working people negatively as racists, that's who they are, and that is not the only defensible way to perceive either labor history or the white working class.

If students only encounter this Roediger book, which is how it works in universities these days, they could well assume that this is the definitive take on white identity--overall, not just among working class whites--and that what was true, or purported to be true, in the nineteenth century still prevails today. That is to say, that the problem in race relations is white racist animosity and feelings of superiority toward African Americans and desires to suppress or hurt them, which is the basic thrust of the Roediger book.

In contrast, my own research with contemporary whites, from all classes, who have a negative posture toward blacks collectively is that, in the main, they aren't racists in the way Roediger paints white people; rather, they have disrespect for blacks' conduct and want to get away from them.¹⁶ The strongest impulse among whites that take issue with blacks is not, the term that is most often used these years, white supremacy, but rather white separatism. It is not hate but rather disdain. If universities are going to do more than preach the racial gospel, they will need to come to grips with contemporary racial realities. Whatever the merits of *Wages of Whiteness* as an historical account, it does not suffice in that regard.

Sato and Lensmire suggest in their article that white students would do well to begin their investigations into their own racial

identities by reading Roediger's edited book, *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*.¹⁷ Again, defensible scholarship, that's not the issue. The issue is with the book's bias, and whether white students who read it will consider what these black writers have to say about them to be the last word on who they are, which it most certainly isn't. White students should also read what white writers say about them as a race--that should be obvious--including white writers who think positively about them.

The titles of the six parts of *Black on White* give an indication of its take on white people: "Confronting Whiteness and Seeing Through Race"; "Whiteness as Property: The Workings of Race"; "The White World and Whiter America"; "Some White Folks"; "White Women, White Men"; and "White Terrors." (Are black university students reading books with sections called "Black Terrors"?) And there is this in Roediger's introduction to the book:

No thinker so fully brought together the many dimensions of African-American studies of whiteness as [black novelist and essayist] James Baldwin [1924-1987]. Attention to power, to property, to work, to tragedy, to culture, to terror, to gender, to sexuality, to variety, to complexity, to contradiction, and to change informed his deep and persistent inquiries into what it has meant to be white. It is hard to imagine Baldwin resorting to language quite so cumbersome and clinical as the academically popular phrase, the "social construction of whiteness." His subtle disarming of biologically driven racial categories left room for individual decisions and tragedies. Adopting and treasuring a white identity is, he wrote, "absolutely a moral choice" since "there are no white people." The choice was made by men and women themselves undergoing a "vast amount of coercion" over generations. It was a choice based on blood-soaked practices. "Slaughtering cattle, poisoning the wells, torching the houses, massacring Native Americans, raping black women," were not, for Baldwin, mere symptoms of white racism but the terrors which forged white identity. . . . Baldwin likened the process of becoming white to being "trapped in a factory." Baldwin called white people out of the factory. "As long as you think you are white," he observed, tough-lovingly, "there's no hope for you."¹⁸

I think you get the picture of what's going on here. This is what Professors Sato and Lensmire mean by their white students making sense of who they are. They point out that most of their students are women. Tomorrow's white mothers can pass this view of themselves on to their children.

And then there is the Rev. Thandeka book *Learning to Be White: Race, God and Money in America*¹⁹ that Sato and Lensmire say is a "powerful way into critical whiteness studies." Thandeka is black and describes herself as a Unitarian Universalist minister and theologian, journalist, congressional consultant, and the head of a project called "We Love Beyond Belief." Going by *Learning to Be White*, Rev. Thandeka's love for white people might be a bit qualified. The publisher's blurb of the book says, "Thandeka explores the politics of the white experience in America. Tracing the links between religion, class, and race, she reveals the child abuse, ethnic conflicts, class exploitation, poor self-esteem, and a general feeling of self-contempt that are the wages of whiteness."²⁰

On the Amazon site for Thandeka's book, Roediger shares how impressed he is with it: "No other study so fully demonstrates the origins of white identity in misery and defeat, as well as in power and privilege. Whiteness, Thandeka shows, is a shame which divides and afflicts whites as well as the nation."

In her book, Thandeka, a minister remember, takes on a pastoral air. She sums up her argument:

In sum, our primer of psychological concepts allows us to examine the structure of a Euro-American's white racial identity as an impaired sense of core self, an inability to relate to others with self-integrity. This impairment is the result of episodes in which a person's difference from a white ideal was attacked by her or his own caretaker(s). The white self-image that emerges from this process will include the emotional fallout from the self-annihilating process that created it: the breakup of one's own sense of coherency, efficacy, and agency as a personal center of activity. Whenever the content of this white racial image is exposed, white self-consciousness can feel shame—and rage. . . .

Our primer lets us identify and name the actual feelings of self-contempt engendered in persons who are forced to act "white" in order to survive in their own communities. We call these feelings *white shame*. Using this primer, we can affirm

that such human feelings of shame do

- indicate the presence of a broken spirit, a fallen human nature, a fracture to one's core ability to relate, and
- reveal that sin is indeed present.

Our explanations of these sinful feelings, however, have a critical social edge. In short, we take into account the social environment that creates “whites” and engenders feelings of “white” shame. We note the pervasive child abuse practices, racial indoctrination programs, and class exploitation strategies of Euro-American communities that impair their members' abilities to relate wholeheartedly to others. Our critical investigation thus helps us make sense of the pervasive racial and class fears found in so many Euro-Americans today: shame. They feel *white* shame because the persons who ostensibly loved and respected them the most actually abused them and justified it in the name of race, money, and God.²¹

Child abuse? Class exploitation? Poor self-esteem? Self-contempt? Misery and defeat? Shame? Rage? Broken spirit? Fallen human nature? Fractured ability to relate? Sin? This is what it means to be white? An entire race of people in this country? Not only is this ignorant and bigoted, it is outright nutty. Using this garbage as a course text to depict white identity is contemptible.

Came the day for the class I teach, fourteen students, all white, to consider the Noll issue, “Does a ‘Deficit Model’ Serve Poor Children Well?” and the Payne and Sato and Lensmire articles. This was a couple of weeks ago as I write this. The students were to have read the Noll material and come to class prepared to share their best insights and assessments with the rest of us.

What's your scholarship on this Noll issue? I began.

Hands shot up. In turn, just about every student pitched in with his or her best thinking. All that spoke up, no exceptions, had a negative view of the Payne article. They picked up a tinge of racism in her list of teaching practices, they reported. In contrast, they were mightily impressed with Sato and Lensmire's argument. These white teacher education students need to take a hard look at themselves, they asserted; they are the problem, for sure, absolutely. The class was upbeat, animated, everyone nodding yes to what other people are saying; a good time was being had by all. The

students felt on top it: Ruby Payne was off-base and they had things wired, no doubt about it.

I wasn't surprised at these responses. There's a politically correct orthodoxy that permeates school settings at all levels, not just the university, and students can be counted upon to parrot it on cue and congratulate themselves for being so wise as they are, and to feel assured that they will get strokes from the instructor and other students for being among the progressive-minded select; these reiterations and testimonies are surefire feel-good moments for students. I was quiet through all of this, and I suppose that gave students pause a tad, but still, everybody in the class as far as I could tell felt confident that the boat was sailing in the right direction.

After just about everybody spoke their minds and responded to what others offered, I asked whether anybody had taken the time to check into the Roediger and Thandeka books that Sato and Lensmire had recommended so highly and so prominently. Things quieted down a little. Pause. No, we didn't do that.

Again the response was no surprise to me. About race or anything else, students read what they are told to read, that's it, not a page more than that. All they need to know is basically, sort of, what the writing is about and to have an opinion about it and state that succinctly in class or write it down. And really, I'm not blaming them for coming at their schoolwork that way, or not completely anyway. The reality is that university students aren't really studying anything; they are taking courses. A syllabus is handed out at the beginning of the semester telling them exactly what to read and what to write and when, when to be in class, and when the tests are. Student as assembly line worker. That's the game on the table, and students play it. No muss, no fuss.

And truth be told, I play the game too. I know what I'm supposed to do, hand out the syllabus, keep things moving and don't ruffle any feathers from 1:00 to 2:15 Tuesdays and Thursdays, and don't put students off by giving out bad grades. I'd get grief from administrators and the students themselves if I departed from any of that, and I just don't want to endure the hassle, especially on top of the static I get for being on the wrong side of the diversity crusade and all the rest of the thought reform program going on, and for my blasphemy against the church of socialist ideologue John Dewey in the college of education where I work. I'm not proud of the

duck-and-cover posture I am in just about all the time these days, but there it is.

I said I had gone to the library and checked Amazon and the Internet, and that what I found out about the Roediger and Thandeka books gave me concern. I briefly went into what I've talked about here, whites being linked to racism, child abuse, ethnic conflicts, class exploitation, poor self-esteem, and self-contempt. I read the Roediger testimonial for the Thandeka book on Amazon, lauding her linking white identity to power and privilege and saying that it is a shame that divides and afflicts both whites themselves and the nation. I said I found that view of white people both false and offensive. Imagine if black people, or Jewish people, or Asian people, or Hispanic people, or any people, were characterized in that condemning way? I said. Doesn't this raise some issues about Sato and Lensmire's presentation? What do you think?

Things got real quiet. Slight smiles, people glancing around. What's he up to, I imagined them thinking? I've heard about him. He's a white supremacist, my advisor told me. Nothing bad has happened so far, and he's been a nice guy, but, I mean, why's he bringing this stuff up?

I'm embarrassed to admit that I thought I was still in my duck-and-cover mode with the Roediger and Thandeka comments. I honestly thought I was just taking my turn sharing my analyses of the Noll case. Hey, how about these two books? I looked them up, good for me. You ought to do this kind of thing. If Payne is a racist, isn't this Roediger and Thandeka material at least questionable, don't you think? No big deal. How insensitive I was. I've should have been savvy enough to anticipate the reaction I'd get.

I suppose it took me about two minutes to say what I had to say about Roediger and Thandeka and about my reservations about using those books with teacher education students. During that time, the class, which had up to this point in the hour been very attentive and engaged, changed on a dime. Eyes dropped to the desks or the floor. Little conversations sprung up. The few students who continued to look at me smiled, nervously it seemed. They appeared embarrassed. It was clear to me that I'd crossed a line. I shouldn't have been saying what I was saying. The message came through loud and clear: stop what you are doing . . . please.

Nevertheless, I pressed on. Could I have your attention up here? I say. Slowly, one by one, they looked at me, reluctantly it

seemed. What are your thoughts about what I just said?

No response. Silence. I'm getting nervous and tense, and frankly, at that point I just wanted to go home—it was very near the end of the class hour--and I'm sure that didn't help matters. More silence. Discomfort. Smiles. My eyes are shifting around like the ball in a pinball machine.

Finally a student, young man, raised his hand and went into a kind of speech, complete with hand gestures for emphasis. The only thing I picked up about it was that it didn't have anything to do with what I had just brought up, or even with Noll's deficit issue as a whole. He was going on and I was glancing back and forth between the student driving home his points and the other students and the clock up high on the back wall—bing-bing-bing-bing--focusing in on nothing. The other students were looking at the one talking, but I didn't know whether they were paying attention.

After about three minutes of this student's efforts to inform us about whatever it was, he suddenly, so it seemed to me, stopped.

Silence. The air hung heavy in room 303 Kalkin Hall. Uh, well, I gasped, remember the Noll issue we'll be dealing with next time--

Boom, notebooks started going into backpacks, jackets get donned, mobile phones appeared, and students started to depart, some chatting amiably with one another, nobody looking at me, and I'm still going on about what we are going to be doing in the next class. And then there I am alone in the front of an empty classroom. After a few seconds pause, I put my notes and books in my book bag, erased the blackboard, and left the room, closing the door behind me.

So what do I make of all this? What stands out?

The first thing, how universal this negative, critical, view of whites as a race is in today's university. Every course, every speaker, every professional article and book, every "welcome week" activity in the fall, every program in the dorms, every word uttered in faculty meetings, every committee report, every organization, every administrative pronouncement, every masters thesis and doctoral dissertation, every group email, every bulletin board notice, etc., etc., etc., etc.--concern for and positive references about non-whites, no concern for or positive references about whites. If any university

administrator or academic has said a favorable word about white people as a race, verbally or in print, I don't know about it, and I think I pay attention. This is a truly remarkable phenomenon in its ubiquity.

The late novelist and essayist Susan Sontag, a regular on the university commencement speech circuit, captured the view of whites held by those in power in American universities when she uttered the phrase that became famous, "The white race is the cancer of human history."²² Indeed, whites have their dirty linen—every race does—but the picture isn't all bad in the way universities portray it. I'd be happy to take the whites' side compared to any other race, let's say blacks, in accomplishments in philosophy, the arts and humanities, mathematics, science, technology, architecture, literature, philanthropy, you name it.²³ I'd be willing to compare white communities to black communities, anywhere in the world, on the basis of cleanliness, safety, care for children, and civility. In the area of race relations, you can make the case that whites are abusing blacks and I'll take the other side, which would involve citing interracial crime statistics.²⁴ In race relations, I'll cite examples of white individuals and groups trying to help out disadvantaged black people and you can cite examples of black individuals and groups trying to help out disadvantaged white people.

For whites on campus, even the hint of a positive conception of their racial heritage or of racial consciousness and commitment and solidarity; even a touch of concern for the status and wellbeing of white people; even one word in favor of white advocacy, leadership, organization, and collective action; even the least gesture in the direction of affirming the right of white people to self-determination—don't you dare. Whites are obligated to have an all but obsessive concern for the interests of other races, and to serve those interests, while having absolutely no concern for the circumstance and fate of their own people. In fact, whites should go to work against their racial kinsmen (the race traitor idea).

Zeroing in on the Roediger and Thandeka books shouldn't obscure the fact that they are typical of the fare imposed on white university students, students of all races. Here are a couple others:

• *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the Other Side of Racism*, edited by Paula Rothenberg.²⁵ The book's introductory material states that this book describes the phenomenon of "white privilege and the politics and economics that lie behind the social

construction of whiteness," and that it "explores ideas for using the power and concept of white privilege to help [whites] combat racism in their own lives."

"White power and privilege" is a mantra in universities. A key to understanding critical theory, the political left in general, is that it is a set of abstractions, words strung together with other words, albeit appealingly, it sounds good. But listen carefully, read carefully, and you'll see that there is almost no reference to concrete reality. The message to students: you don't need to look at reality. Just listen to what I tell you, go by that.

There is no better example of this than the white power and privilege rhetoric, repeated and repeated and repeated and repeated, pounded into students. If you look at the actual lives of individual white people, living, breathing human beings, it falls apart. Certainly some white people are in positions of status and power, but the vast majority of them are not by a long shot. Actual white people are my father, who stood on his feet cutting people's hair with his arms up until his feet ached and his back throbbed from 8:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday and rode the bus--we could never afford a car--home to my mother and me (I remember my mother rubbing smelly Bengay ointment on his back in the evenings). Actual white people live in run down trailers in West Virginia. Actual white people work at Home Depot, wait tables at the Olive Garden, take crap from a supervisor at I.B.M., teach the third grade, sell houses or insurance, and process loan applications at the bank. Ask white attorneys and doctors, as I have, how much power and privilege they really have. Let them tell you of the hard work and sacrifice that went into attaining the positions they hold, and of how much commitment they feel toward their patients and clients, and how much they are in service to them. Ask the decent hard-working white parents of my students who worked two jobs and diligently saved money dollar by dollar to pay for their children's college education how powerful and privileged they are. Ask my white students who work twenty hours a week in addition to carrying a full load of courses at the university and do volunteer work on top of that and are bleary eyed-exhausted how powerful and privileged they are. Ask white students who were turned down by elite universities while their black fellow students with far fewer accomplishments were accepted how powerful and privileged they are.

It's been my experience that nothing—nothing--will get the self-satisfied “white privilege” chatterers in universities off their airy pontifications—they are oblivious to criticism. They do the criticizing, thank you. But at least those onto their acts can sneer at them, and that's what they deserve rather than the high regard and deference they now receive.

- *The Invention of the White Race: The Origin of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America*, by Theodore W. Allen.²⁶ According to this book, as was the case with the Rothenberg volume just mentioned, whites' conception of themselves as a distinctive people is based on a fiction; in a very real way, whites don't even exist. Who else, what other group, what other race—name them—is told this about themselves? This is no less than a form of genocide, and don't think for a minute that the most sophisticated proponents of this line don't know it. Literally, and I realize this can sound hyperbolic, they wish that the white race would cease to be.

All that said, however, I'm OK with books like the Rothenberg and White books, or even Thandeka's, being part of the academic discourse in the university—I don't like the repression of ideas, no matter what they are. My problem is that these characterizations of an entire race of people--millions upon millions of them; try to imagine them in your mind's eye, starting with the ones you know, including yourself—are not studied, analyzed, critiqued, considered along with counterarguments and alternative perspectives. Rather they are imposed on students, indoctrinated, propagandized, as the Truth, case closed.

The negative stereotype of whites that students of all races get pushed in their faces increases rather than diminishes racial grievance and discord and intolerance, especially among non-whites against whites. It separates us rather than brings us together. But then again, that is what the critical perspective wants; Marxism is about friction, not reconciliation.

If students read something like the Rothenberg and Allen books, they also should read books that offer a positive view of white identity, say, Jared Taylor's book, *White Identity: Racial Consciousness in the 21st Century*.²⁷ Give students of all races, not just whites, room to make choices of what to believe. Respect their academic freedom and freedom of conscience. But then again, these concepts are not in the vocabulary of the people who control the education of America's sons and daughters in universities.

What I find particularly remarkable about the phenomenon that I have been describing is that, at least publically, nobody finds it remarkable. Nobody ever says, "Every other race on campus has a student organization and spokespeople except white students, and if whites tried to form an organization it would be forbidden. What if blacks or Asians didn't have an organization, and couldn't if they want to? That wouldn't be right, would it?" Nobody ever says, "We have an endless number of programs and presentations with a positive African American angle but none from a positive European heritage, white, angle. We ought to do something about that." Or says, "Can any of us name one white organization or leader that isn't discredited?" Or, "Can any of us name one book that makes a positive case for white people?" I can't imagine the editors of the *Phi Delta Kappan* that published the Sato and Lensmire piece thinking for a second about what these two writers were saying about white people.

I've never once heard of a white student announcing, "How about if you knock off trashing my people--you aren't doing it with anybody else. And quit telling me what to think. I'm here for academics." I've never heard of a white parent calling into question what's going on. As far as I can tell, just about everybody buys into the program.

Of course the question is why?

Parents remain silent because they don't want to get their child in hot water. But even more than that, they have gotten the word from educators at all levels, elementary school on up, that what goes on in the school is none of their business.

As for the people in the university, both faculty and students, largely it comes down to the fact that one perspective on race stands alone in everybody's minds, and it pays off for them to ascribe to it.

It is important to remember that universities are insular places, separated from the wider world. The radical left, neo-Marxist, critical theory perspective has a stranglehold on the ideational context, to call it that, in the university--the thoughts, images, arguments, and conceptions of the preferable and right that prevail in this little world. For people in the university, both faculty and students, these notions are like the water fish swim in; it's all they know. To stay with that metaphor, if people try to add some different coloring to the water, one drop and they are stopped in

their tracks: they are attacked, trashed, harassed, marginalized, excluded, sent packing.

Also, going along with the program is a way for people to get their basic needs met. For faculty and administrators, that means getting hired and promoted, given merit pay increases, being affirmed and respected and invited to faculty parties, and accepted for publication in the right journals and by the right book publishers. For students, that means being welcomed into the university community, being positively acknowledged and praised by both faculty and their fellow students, winning awards, and getting good grades and favorable recommendations.

Too, going along with the program is a way to stay out of trouble. For faculty that means not getting your office moved next to the ticket window at the gymnasium, and for students in means not getting your application to become a resident hall advisor in the dorm turned down.

The point: know the prevailing ideas and reward and punishment contingencies in the university, or in any setting, and you go a long way in being able to predict both the behaviors and thoughts in that circumstance. And by thoughts I mean the *sincerely* held beliefs and values. People really buy in to what they are supposed to believe according to those in power over them; they aren't faking it. Human beings are like sled dogs: as long as they get pats on their heads and some fresh water and tasty chunks of beef in their bowls, they'll pull the sleds in whatever direction their trainers want them to go and like it. I'll go so far as to claim that if today's university occupants, both faculty and students, had been in German universities in the 1930s, instead of going on about white privilege and racism and hate, they would have been tried and true National Socialists. I'm serious. Human beings are remarkably malleable creatures.

Or at least most of them are. There are always those few who don't, another metaphor, march in step with the drummer.

Knowing that I have written books and articles about race from a perspective of respect and concern for white people, every now and again, I can't say it is very often, couple, two or three times a year or so, white students surreptitiously approach me to report that they feel put down by faculty in their race-related courses, and that it is insistent and persistent, and repetitive and simplistic, and sometimes harsh. Often, they say, their instructors are non-white,

and they sense that these faculty bear resentment and animosity toward people of their kind, toward them; there is an edge to the class context they find discomfiting and intimidating. As a white person, I would never presume to teach a class of black students and tell them definitively who they are and where they came from, and particularly I wouldn't do it if my message to them was that their identity was negative and cause for guilt and redemption; but in universities it goes on in reverse all the time without any analysis and debate that I am aware of.

As well, university faculty, particularly those just starting out on their academic careers, email me through my web site saying something to the effect that feel as if they are in Eastern Germany before the fall of the Berlin wall and they want my advice as to what to do.

What do I tell the people who approach me? For better or worse, most often I tell them to lay low. They are very vulnerable. If they stick their heads out of their foxholes—go public in a big way—they'll get them shot off. For faculty, better to stay and subvert the system than be where they want you, on the outside looking in. Be very careful about social media and the Internet, I suggest. As I write this paragraph, I'm reminded of a book I'm reading about the French writer Albert Camus during the Nazi occupation of France during World War II. He wrote for a resistance publication called "Combat," but he did it under a pseudonym and stayed undercover.²⁸

Of course there are exceptions to everything. I'm writing this under my real name. But then again, I'm tenured and a full professor and for whatever reason able to put up with nobody ever saying a second sentence to me (the first one, if I'm right in their face, is a mechanical "Hello"). Right now, this moment, I'm anxious as hell, and I'm this way every waking moment of my life. But while it is an uncomfortable way to exist, I'm fine with it. I see it as dues I have to pay to be who I am, and that's my first priority. We all have to decide our own way forward in life.²⁹

Obviously, I see what's happening around race in American universities to be antithetical to what the university has historically been about and ought to be about now, and as simply un-American. What's going is someplace else's way of doing business; it is alien to the fundamental tenets of this country. It's dictatorial, tyrannical.

And I'd be saying the same thing if what is happening with white people were happening to black people or Asian people or Hispanic people or Jewish people or Arab people—I don't want to see anybody diminished or told to get to the back of the line, and especially I don't want this happening to children and young adults.

I think we ought to cut out the totalism and re-connect with the traditional marketplace-of-ideas conception of the American university, and not just around race: the university should get out of the thought management business altogether—diversity and egalitarianism and feminism and gay rights and environmentalism and all the rest of political correctness—and concentrate on academics. Universities are schools, not secular churches or re-socialization centers. Students' personal beliefs and commitments are none of the university's business.

Are things ever going to change?

I can't see the university changing from within anytime in the foreseeable future. The current system aligns with the beliefs of the people in power, and it pays off everybody involved for going along with it, and it effectively punishes those who would deign to run up against it. The few outliers like me who for whatever reason can't be gotten rid of are relegated to pariah status. Any memoranda and position statements we slip under doors are tossed into waste paper baskets. I'll retire next year or the next, and you can be sure that the person that replaces me is not going to have a negative word to say about Thandeka, just the opposite. And if the hiring committee messes up and brings the wrong person on board, that will be remedied when it comes time to pass judgment on his or her applications for reappointment, promotion, and tenure.

The only way universities are ever going to change as far as I can see is from the outside. Alterations in social, cultural, political, economic, and/or demographic realities could compel universities to change. If something led American whites to wise up to the fact that they are being supplanted, pushed around, and plucked like a goose by people who loathe them, and that prompted them to get organized and active, including politically, like every other group in this country, part of that could be taking a hard at what's being done with their children in schools and doing something about it. If white parents quit forking over tuition money to schools that dumped on them and their children, that would have an effect; money talks big in the university. Not impossible, white students or

ex-students could at some point notice that every other group on campus is organized to the hilt except them and create white on- or off-campus organizations to speak for them and look out for their interests. And beyond any of that, doesn't history show that after a period of kowtowing to being demeaned and manipulated, people reach the point where they've had enough of it and turn on their handlers?

But all that is up the line, if it ever happens. What do people who take exception to what's going on around race in universities do now? As I see it, what we can do is the best we can, as the unique persons we are, in the circumstances we find ourselves in, with whatever we can think of to do, big or small, today, tomorrow, and the next day and the day after that, until the day we die, which is coming--it's the one certainty in life. As the title of the New Riders of the Purple Sage song puts it, we can keep on keepin' on. Nothing good may come out of it, for all I know the battle is lost, probably is. But the challenge of being a human being is to keep on keepin' on anyway, no matter what results from it. As far as I can tell, that is the best way to be satisfied with our lives on this earth, and it's the best way to be at peace with the prospect of entering eternity, which is just up the road.

Notes

1. James Noll, editor, *Taking Sides: Clashing Views on Educational Issues*, sixteenth edition (McGraw-Hill, 2012).
2. Ibid., pp. 133-148.
3. The article originally appeared in the April 2008 edition of *Educational Leadership*, pp. 48-52.
4. The book was published by aha?Process, Inc., 2008.
5. Noll, p. 135.
6. The article appeared in the January 2009 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, pp. 365-370.
7. David Roediger, editor, *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to be White in America* (Schocken, 1999). Thandeka, *Learning to Be White: Money, Race, and God in America* (Bloomsbury Academic, 2000).

8. Robert Jay Lifton, *Witness to an Extreme Century: A Memoir* (Free Press, 2011).

9. I expand on the idea of totalism in a short and long version of a 2011 writing for my web site, robertsgriffin.com: "Totalism and Thought Reform in American Universities."

10. For background reading on critical theory, see, Thomas Popkewitz, editor, *Critical Theories in Education* (Routledge, 1999).

11. For background reading on the Frankfurt School, see Michael Robertson, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Significance* (MIT Press, 1995).

12. The McClaren quote can be found at the web site entitled "Rage and Hope."

<http://www.perfectfit.org/CT/index2.html>

13. A Marcuse book that makes this case for shutting up and shutting down the academic opposition is *An Essay on Liberation* (Beacon Press, 1971).

14. This material on Roediger, including the quote, can be found online in a review of *Learning to Be White* by Laurie Garrett-Cobbina.

<http://journals.sfu.ca/rpfs/index.php/rpfs/article/viewFile/247/246>

15. David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (Verso, 2007).

16. See my book, *One Sheaf, One Vine: Racially Conscious White Americans Talk About Race* (Authorhouse, 2005).

17. *Black on White*, op. cit.

18. Ibid., pp. 20-22.

19. *Learning to Be White*, op. cit.

20. The publisher's blurb is on the Amazon site for the Thandeka book.

21. *Learning to Be White*, pp. 127 and 133-134.

22. The Sontag quote is from *Partisan Review*, Winter 1967, p. 57.

23. A book that helps make this case is Charles Murray. *Human Accomplishment: Excellence in the Arts and Sciences, 800 B.C. to 1950* (Harper Perennial, 2004).

24. For crime statistics broken down by race, see *Color of Crime: Race, Crime, and Justice in America* (New Century Foundation, 2005). A free PDF of the book can be obtained at <http://www.colorofcrime.com/colorofcrime2005.html>

25. Paula Rothenberg, *White Privilege: Essential Readings on the*

Other Side of Racism (Worth, 2004).

26. Theodore W. White, *The Invention of the White Race: The Origins of Racial Oppression in Anglo-America* (Verso, 2012).

27. Jared Taylor, *White Identity: Racial Consciousness in the 21st Century* (New Century Books, 2011).

28. Sean B. Carroll, *Brave Genius* (Crown, 2013).

29. Three thoughts on my web site—www.robertsgriffin.com—that get into how I deal with my circumstance at the university: “On Being a Modern Day Spinoza”; “On Trying to Charm the Uninterested”; and “On Bullying.”