

How University Students Think  
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This writing is best viewed as a companion piece to a couple others on this site. One of them is "How University Academics Think," the eleventh source down from this one, in which I suggest that the investigation of how university faculty and administrators see things is an important area of inquiry and offer some thoughts in this regard. While I hope this paper on the way university students think, at least in some areas of their studies, stands on its own, I believe it makes most sense if it is considered in conjunction with the one on faculty; I see them as an interrelated pair. Too, it will be helpful to explore both writings within the context of the educational ideology, goals, and strategies I outline in "Totalism and Thought Reform in America's Universities"--either the short or long version, the second and third sources down. I hope these three writings encourage others to contribute their own insights to this general concern, take what I've offered further, amend and correct it, and so on.

I'm a professor of education and interested in how education works and why, in all contexts, not just schools. In the last year or so I have explored a form of education one might call mind control, or a term I used in a recent thought for this site, taken from psychologist Robert J. Lifton's work and one of his central formulations, thought reform. (See the 2011 writing "Totalism and Thought Reform in America's Universities.") Whatever it is called--inculcation, conditioning, propaganda, re-education, and brainwashing are other labels that come to mind--the idea is to get your students, or subjects, clientele--anyway the people whose minds you want to shape--all to think the way you do, the right way, and the only right way. There aren't two sides, or legitimate alternatives, to the matters you care about, and there aren't any strings hanging loose, everything's resolved for all time. What you want is *it*, the Truth, period. And since actions come out of thoughts, your charges will all act the way you do, the right way, the correct and proper way, the one and only valid way. You feel obligated to dedicate yourself to this endeavor because you have a sure handle on both reality and morality. You've seen the light; that is simply the fact of the matter.

In "Totalism and Thought Reform in America's Universities" I posited that grounded in a totalist orientation, thought reform is a favored strategy of those on the ideological/political left, who now hold sway in this country's colleges and universities. An overall term for the direction in which this approach wants to take things is *social justice*, which I defined in that writing thusly:

In brief, the idea is to de-Europeanize (which includes de-Christianize) this country, de-nationalize it, collectivize it (make the group, not the individual, the salient reality), equalize it, and democratize it (empower the group, especially the government, over the individual--constitutional republics, we pledge allegiance to one, don't go far enough in that direction). This involves bringing minorities up a peg and white people, especially their men, who have been on the wrong side of history, down a peg, and using the government to confiscate resources from people who have too much and redistribute them to people who have too little. And while that's going on, cleaning up the environment . . .

While this phenomenon is centered in universities, it has filtered down into the elementary and secondary schools and prevails there as well. Those who control education at those levels were trained up in universities dominated by the social justice, or politically correct, perspective. By the time students get to me in the university, in great majority they have been very effectively socialized in this direction. I am taken by the uniformity of my undergraduate students' perspective on social/cultural/political matters, and I ponder what impact this will have on America in the upcoming decades.

Especially good for you if you are in the social justice-promoting thought reform enterprise in a school context these days, particularly the university, is that given who is in charge and what ideas predominate in our time you aren't sacrificing anything in performing this good deed because it just so happens that working to get everybody to think and behave as if they were as enlightened and upright as you are not only makes the world a better place it also works out well for you personally. It gives you good feelings about yourself, and attention, and others like and respect you for what you are doing and include you in things and reward you in various ways, give you jobs, promotions, awards, and the like, and

oftentimes it puts you and yours in the front of the line when the perks of life get distributed. Another way to say it, it serves what I have termed in other writings on this site Maslow needs--basic, fundamental human requirements and wants. (See, for example, "How University Academics Think" toward the end.)

One the challenges you face if you are going to socialize others all to think the same right way--let's assume for the rest of this writing, that means having a firm commitment to social justice--is making sure they stay in the proper groove when they aren't with you. Your students, trainees, whatever to call them, aren't going to be around your wise influence forever, and even now they don't spend all their time within your good graces. For certain, they are going to run into the wrong kind of people and ideas: misguided and ignorant ones (you are in the know); anachronistic, out of date ones (you are cutting edge); and malevolent if not downright evil ones (you are atop the moral high ground). And that is not good at all. You can do your best to keep the chances of that happening to a minimum by working with others of like mind to control the public discourse and demonize, marginalize, exclude, and silence reactionary and bad people and ideas. And you can get across to your students that they know all there is to know about the important things with a certainty and no good purpose is served by seeking out contrary ideas and causes and theorists and advocates. Why expose yourself to falseness and immorality? While that will solve a lot of the problem, still, venomous people and ideas are going to get right in your students' faces no matter how hard they try to stay clear of them. You need to equip them with strategies for dealing with those circumstances all the while staying on course. One of best of these, you can teach them an agree/disagree/I think mindset and response strategy. This writing is about explaining what that is and how it works.

The last couple of years I've noticed a response pattern in the college students I teach in a university and in the reactions of young people, up to, say, their late twenties, that respond to the writings on this site. My guess is that it was going on long before that and I just wasn't picking up on it, but in any case it comes through to me now. I'm talking about their reactions to the kinds of things I tend to focus on--race, education, philosophy, organized sports, the arts,

the mass media, universities, personal health and fulfillment, growing up well, and parenting. Whatever the topic, they seem to engage other people's ideas--mine, anybody's--just enough for it to prompt a decision of whether they agree or disagree with it, and then they either leave it at that and move on or they point out what they think about the topic--not what the other person wrote or said, but rather that general topic. And more and more it seems, I can predict what direction they are going to take with that.

For instance, in response to something I write about the circumstance of European heritage, or white, people, after saying whether they agree or disagree with it (the preponderance of them disagree), if they go on from there, and it about 50/50 that they do or don't, they say what they think about white people, and typically it falls into the category of racist-privileged-oppressive negative stereotyping. The particulars of what I wrote is left out of it, beside the point to them, unworthy of consideration or exploration. If I'm in their presence, they don't ask me to expand upon or explain what I presented. No need for that; just a terse I-disagree followed by a brief I-think exposition.

As far as I can tell, my students in the university--not every one of them, I'm generalizing here--feel no need to spend time and effort working with the ideas, claims, and proposals that come into their lives (they don't seek them out), analyzing them, extending them, thinking creatively about them, assessing them, and/or identifying their significance or meaning; a surface encounter will do. In their eyes, so it seems, they are experts, on top of things, they've got it down pat, case closed; they are just fine as they are. If anybody puts out something that doesn't square with what they know for a fact, these people, and of course that includes me, are their inferiors. They could be twenty years old and I've written three books and numerous short writings on race, but that cuts for nothing; I'm uninformed and wrong and they know what's up, and either they leave it at that or they put in a modicum of effort, and in a few cases more than that, to straighten me out. I spend a good bit of my working life being lectured to by university undergraduates whose assuredness about race and a host of other things, I must say, exceeds my own.

In my experience, students tend to be extremely self-referential in their thinking. Thomas Jefferson, anybody, matters only to the

extent that he or she brings them back to themselves and what is in their heads, however it got there, and they spend no energy that I can pick up pondering that topic. Almost immediately, the consideration becomes about what they think, their opinions. Try as I may in classes to keep students referenced in ideas and people outside themselves, working to understand the external world on its terms and not theirs, they talk about themselves.

E-mail responses to this site from younger people invariably come down to whether the responders agree or disagree with what I have written or, a variant of that, whether they liked it or not. Usually they leave it at that in text-message brevity, or they get into their own views, or, at times, tell me about what they wrote. In any case, I can be pretty sure the correspondence will be about them. I'm basically, so it seems, an occasion for them to talk about themselves.

An aside, I speculate that this self-referential tendency is influenced by the texting, Facebook, Twitter, Internet-discussion-list world we live in in our time. Life is about us; we do the talking, and really, we don't have to say all that much or go all that deeply into anything; just thumb out or type out a brief blurb--you don't even need to bother with capital letters or concern yourself with grammar. The spotlight is on us; we and our iPads and laptops are the show. I note that Time magazine's person of the year this past year is the protester, us, me. In past years it would have been Ghandi or some other great personage. In any case, Jefferson, back to him, had his turn, and now it's our turn, my turn.

Back to the focus in this writing, I speculate that whatever else accounts for it, this agree/disagree/I think and self-referential propensity is an aspect of the current thought reform education in the social justice direction prevalent in our time in schools and universities. I don't know how consciously aware the thought reformers are that they are instilling this predisposition in students, although my guess is that they know what they are doing at least at level of a gross understanding. They encourage students to touch down very lightly and back away from anything that doesn't align with what they have been taught to believe and favor and refer to themselves and how they view whatever it is. When they look inside themselves in the process of doing that they find what their trainers put in them, and articulating that either to themselves or publically reiterates, reinforces, and entrenches it in their beings; and that

keeps them on track. In fact, there is a "gift of the hit" benefit in what happened: bumping up against the wrong people and ideas (a hit) and the testimony and reaffirmation that follows from it enhances their commitment to true and correct ideas and ways. I leave it to others to take my speculations further, check them out for their veracity and expand on them if it is merited.

I get the educational manifestation of the left-leaning social justice thrust--it's called progressive education--in the teacher education courses I teach. If you have read my writings in this site and elsewhere you know that I'm not enamored of progressive education, which now dominates the field, and has for many decades, since the 1920s and '30s, that long. My students in the these courses have been exposed to a number of teacher education professors before they get to me, all of them progressives, and I spend a good bit of my time in classes and through their writings being told by students how schools have to operate prefaced with their pronouncements that they disagree with me. That I have worked in schools at every level, elementary to graduate school, for almost a half century, and thought hard about education and written a great deal about it doesn't impress them or slow them down a bit.

The "disagrees" in my classes don't feel the least need to study anything I've written or ask me anything. All they need to know, or so it appears, is the answer to a simple yes-no question: do they agree with my educational views or not? And really, they can get that accomplished by skimming quickly through a writing of mine, or from a comment I make in class, or from just my reputation, which is in the walk-and-talk of the college, you can't miss it. He's a guy you disagree with, they picked that up, so get on with the disagreeing, or, since he's got the grade book in his upper desk drawer, keep quiet and endure him and spend the class time glancing furtively at your cell phone messages and looking down at the floor. In any case, his views don't square with yours and therefore he's wrong; that's all you need to know about him.

I just finished a semester of teaching a course dealing with the history and philosophy of education, which is a required in teacher preparation at my university. I'm thinking in particular of one student in the course, a very pleasant young man. (Another aside: The students I'm talking about in this writing are very nice people,

good people, well-intended people. I like them personally very much.) The class met once a week for three hours for a semester, fourteen weeks, and two, perhaps three, times each class session, this student's face would light up and he'd quickly raise his hand. "I don't agree with that," he'd announce, and then he would profess the progressive educational conventional wisdom on the general topic we were addressing at the time. If he knew anything about the specific material we were studying, or had any curiosity about it, you couldn't prove it by me. To him, the course was an occasion to share what he thought--or better, *knew*--about education. As far as I could tell, even though it was a reiteration of the party line, he thought the ideas originated with him. However it happened, this young student had been taught--or so I speculate--to be no-doubt-at-all sure of himself. When you want to indoctrinate people, one of the things you do is remove any ambiguity, qualification, contingent thinking, and doubt. It's truth versus ignorance, this or that, one or the other, there's nothing complicated about it. It's goodness aligned against the forces of darkness, which side are you on, stand up and be counted, get on board.

I tried any number of times to get across to this teacher education student that he would be empowered if he put effort into understanding and analyzing and discerning the implications of other people's thinking, to understanding things from their perspective, that rather than bringing things so quickly back to himself and what he believes. You are going to spend your life recycling what you already know and value, wherever that came from, I told him, if you don't do pay attention to ideas and perspectives outside of those currently residing in your head. You aren't going to grow and become your own person doing what you're doing, just repeating what you've exposed to at some time or another, not studied, not examined critically, even though you aren't aware that that is what you are doing. So I said in as many ways as I could think of to phrase it.

His response, and I get this all the time, another pattern I perceive, was a slight smile. That was it, nothing more, just the smile. Beyond that, or so it seemed, he ignored me. It's as if I hadn't said what I said. He didn't debate me, refute me, and, needless to say, he doesn't ask me to explain further what I was telling him. It was as if from his perspective he hadn't asked me to interject myself into his life in this way; he didn't want it, didn't

need it, and to the degree he could manage it, it didn't happen, it simply didn't compute. I surmise--I'm guessing through all of this--that his "smile-nobody home" response is a form of the disagree/I think response he has been taught, imposed, whatever the best term. In any case, the next class, the smile and up goes his hand and here comes the "I disagree/I think" speech.

It appears to me that is this student's teacher training program does not encourage him to explore a variety of educational perspectives and approaches and make up his own mind which of them is best, either across the board or in particular circumstances and with particular students, but rather to convert him to the progressive educational faith. And it is done with the best of intentions. If you know the Truth (not *a* truth, *the Truth*), why not preach it, impose it, take it on as a mission, a crusade?

To reiterate, the premise here is that to keep people on the right path, your path, it helps to get them to take in, with head and heart, what you are telling them while at the same time forgetting they got it from you so they'll think they came to these conclusions on their own; and get across that if they go through life staying true to these ideas and ways they'll be cool, accepted, respected, safe, prosperous, and happy (and at the same time point out the hell people go through for getting outside of the fold); and get them to have confidence that they are now nestled among the enlightened and know all they will ever need to know about what is true and proper; and get them to invoke an agree/disagree/I think response to anything that relates to what you care about. And then send them on their way.

It is tough to get this done in the university particularly and in the educational system generally? Is it an intricate, complicated process? My answer, no, it isn't. Propagandizing, brainwashing, socializing, indoctrinating, thought reforming, whatever term you prefer, isn't tough to do at all. A point I've made elsewhere on this site is that human beings are remarkably suggestible and malleable creatures (see, for example, the writing "A Message in the In-Box"). If you and people like you are in a position to manage the information and claims that come into people's heads and their rewards and punishments--and you can do that in schools--you can create your own little politically correct zombies, although of course you wouldn't use such a snide term to characterize the outcome of



your efforts. And if we are talking about social justice, broadly defined anyway, what really contributes to your effectiveness is that it's not as if you have to get your job done amid a host of people working at cross purposes with you: what you are up to is supported, reinforced, by the other major socializing forces in society, among them, the major media, including television, film, and the music industry, and liberal and left-of-center churches, politicians, and journalists.

Or at least that is the case in the main. For whatever reason, some people don't go along with the program. That's always been true, under Hitler, Stalin, East Germany, wherever. They don't dance to the tune, they don't pull the sled where the driver says, whatever the best metaphor. Why these exceptions, your list is as good as mine: parental influence; taking the "wrong" book out of the library; associating with the wrong people; coming across a web site they aren't supposed to know about (including this one); a contrary streak in their make-up, something. Some individuals are simply smart enough to see what their trainers are doing with the maze and the food pellets and decide to chuck being a lab animal and escape from the box. Not to your thinking probably, but to mine these people, however they got that way, are the hope for us all.

If what I've offered here touches down, with reasonable accuracy anyway, on what is going on, what do you do?

If you like social justice and thought reform as a way of getting everybody on the same page, you celebrate and keep up the good work.

If you don't, and of course I'm in this camp, I can think of three things you might try:

- Acquaint others with the diversity of outlooks and preferred ways that exist in the world about everything that really matters in life. The diversity advocates are not big on philosophical or intellectual diversity; you can counteract that.

- Point out that if someone is going to become their own person and live their way rather than go through life as a foot soldier in somebody else's army, or living a life of cliché, however you put it, they need to expel the prior conditioning they have undergone; and they need to expand their repertoire of thought and action possibilities by understanding, analyzing, and assessing the

implications of a wide variety of perspectives on what is true and just in both the public and private realms of existence.

- Nudge people toward external reality and away from simply putting words to their inner, subjective realities. Push them to get out of themselves. "I know you disagree [or agree], and I hear you about what you think, but what exactly does this other person think, and why does he or she think that way?" or "How about if we get out of abstractions and rhetoric to the level of concrete reality, to what is actually going on?" Something like that.

Will any of that work? The truth, I have had no particular success doing it that I can discern, or maybe I've had some . . . I'm not sure. Basically, I'm afraid, the late psychologist B. F. Skinner had it right when he contended that human beings are shaped by their circumstances: take into account their stimulus conditions and reinforcement contingencies, Skinner's terms, and you can predict what they will do--and, I would add, you can also predict what they will think or believe.

But still, even with that acknowledgment, I believe enough in the potential for critical analysis and self-determination that I started out the second sentence in this last paragraph with the word "basically." *Basically*, statistically, if you can determine the idea flow and reward and punishment arrangement--which I, and people like me, most certainly don't have the power to do--you can get the vast majority of people to march in your May Day parade. But not absolutely everybody, that's the point, and as far as I'm concerned the saving grace in all of this. If I'm whispering in people's ear--and you are if you agree with me, speaking of agreement--that they are being had, we just might be able to increase the number of "non-marchers" by a few, or even just one, and I've decided that prospect is worth my time to try to make happen.

And even if I'm wrong and there is nothing at all that I, or you, can do about what's going on--it's a lost cause, the game is over--I think it is still worthwhile that we, if you are in this with me, plug on anyway. Here's where, as I have in several other places in this site, get existential, if I'm not misusing that term. Living honestly and honorably, with integrity, acting in accordance with one's highest understandings and values, is an end in itself. Push the rock up the hill and when it falls back on you push it back up the hill again . . . and again . . . and again. And do that until the end of you. Another way to say it, sing your true song the best you can for as

long as you can, come what may. As far as I can tell, even if nothing comes out of your rock pushing or singing, however best to depict it, that's the best way to be in good graces with yourself now and at the very end of our time on this earth when each of us takes stock of what we've done with the incredible gift of life we been given and either die in peace or in despair.