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Whitey Don't see that

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The rising recognition of 'white privilege' in Western academia



OKER CHEN PHOTO

by Momoko Price

Canada's international reputation as a multicultural mosaic—an ethnic patchwork quilt, so to speak—is its pride and joy. Public school students are indoctrinated about this virtue early on, often before their young ears have even come across the word 'mosaic' in its conventional context. Against the 'melting-pot' identity of the US, the Canadian mosaic boasts of two great things: an exceptionally high number of visible minorities as well as an open cultivation of immigrant communities and subcultures. Canada, in comparison to most other nations, is a pretty nice place to live—for anyone and everyone.

But one wonders if Canadian culture is really as yielding and egalitarian as our image would have us believe. Is the fight for human rights or better minority representation in society a vestige of the 60s and 70s? After all, women are now making up around 60 per cent of students at the post-secondary level, same-sex marriage is a go and our federal government passed the explicitly anti-discriminatory Human Rights Act over 20 years ago. Looking at the laws in place and the wide spectrum of skin tones, sexualities and gender identities walking our streets, you might think Canadian society is as egalitarian as it's going to get. It's no wonder that human rights protests are few and far between, and that aside from heckling the odd anti-abortion display, university students just don't get all that riled up over social injustice anymore.

WAR OF THE WORDS

People don't really flinch in the face of swear words these days, but they certainly pay attention when words like 'sexist' and 'racist' are brought into the ring. Public scandals like Michael Richards's recent meltdown on *Laugh Factory* and his poorly received apology on *Letterman* demonstrate just how reviled and unforgivable blatant racism is. In our society, being culturally sensitive and 'politically correct,' or PC, is expected. Anything less would be uncivilised—hell, it would be downright ignorant.

But is it possible for cultural tolerance to swing so far one way that it actually becomes unjustly intolerant? David Bercuson, a historian at the University of Calgary and co-author of *Petrified Campus: the Crisis in Canada's Universities*, believes it is. His book, written in reaction to, among other things, the PC movement of the 90s, describes how some university faculty members ended up with their jobs and reputations between the crosshairs because they were targeted by the vehement PC outrage of students and the community.

When asked whether or not he believes that 'political correctness' can stifle debate, Bercuson explained: "It's like a chill... For example, we could talk about Western countries' failure to do anything about Darfur... we could discuss it on the basis of the fact that it causes military problems, or that it does this or that. Or someone could just get up and say it's [because of] racism. Well, when you've done that, I think you've poisoned the debate."

"'Racism' is a word that we abhor," he continued. "We abhor any thought that we are engaging in this kind of invective. How are you supposed to defend yourself against [an accusation] like that?"

And while Bercuson believes PC ideologies have the potential to be abused and manipulated, organisations like the UK-based Campaign Against Political Correctness (CAPC) hold PC ideals in such contempt that they actively campaign to abolish them altogether. They stress (as do most critics of PC policies) that the world needs to stop the cultural madness and just get back to common sense.

TELLIN' IT LIKE IT IS, OR AT LEAST, LIKE I'M USED TO

Laurence Berg, Canada Research Chair for Human Rights, Diversity and Identity, disagrees with the idea that PC language and policies are oppressive. Why? Because he doesn't really believe that PC policies existed in the first place.

"What [they]'re calling the 'PC movement' I would call a social movement by marginalised people and the people who support them," he said. "[A movement] to use language that's more correct—not 'politically correct'—that more accurately represents reality."

Berg is referring to a way of thinking that many of us students were too young to catch the first time around. For us, the term 'politically correct' survived the 90s, but the term 'human rights backlash' did not. Will Hutton, former editor-in-chief for the UK publication *the Observer*, described in his column how the term 'PC' was never really a political stance at all, contrary to popular belief. It was actually perceived by many as a right-wing tactic to dismiss—or backlash against—left-leaning social change. Mock the trivial aspects of human rights politics, like its changing language, and you'll succeed in obscuring the issue altogether.

Berg believes this is what political correctness is all about: "The term politically correct is a reactionary term," he said. "[It was] created by people who were worried by [social] changes... that affected their everyday understanding of the world in ways that pointed out their role in creating or reproducing dominance and subordination."

According to Berg, the indignation people feel against PC ideas reflects the discomfort we feel when language and politics begin to pull away from the dominant values we grew up with—in other words, white, middle-class values. It's no small coincidence that the concept of political correctness originated in the 80s and 90s, just after human rights concerns and visible minority groups started getting real attention in politics and the media.

Berg explains that in its original context, PC was a pejorative term used by people who felt they were losing something. Exactly what they were losing is very hard to describe, especially to them. But many sociologists and historians today have come to a consensus on what they call it: it's a loss of privilege—and in terms of race, a loss of white privilege.

I ONCE WAS BLIND BUT NOW I SEE... DON'T I?

As soon as the terms 'race' and 'white' get thrown onto the same table, things start to get tense. You feel it already, don't you? It's not something people are all that comfortable talking about, what with the ugly realities of colonialism, the slave-trade and you know, the Nazis, but academics are stressing that it isn't something we can keep ignoring.

In the US, where racial conflicts and issues generally take a higher priority than in Canada, 30 universities including Princeton and UCLA now offer courses explicitly called whiteness studies, whose objective is to delineate exactly how society has formed and become constrained into the slanted system we live in because of past discrimination against non-whites. These studies have not only been hotly disputed by Conservative Americans, they haven't been well received by Conservative Canadians, either. Just last month *National Post* columnist Barbara Kay wrote a heated article called "Blaming Whitey," in which she angrily declared that "the goal of whiteness studies is to entrench permanent race consciousness in everyone—eternal victimhood for non-whites, eternal guilt for whites."

But according to UBC political scientist Bruce Baum (whose response to Kay was also published in the *Post*) the objective of whiteness studies and white privilege as a concept is not to promote selfhate, guilt or victimhood—it's to bring attention to how the active racism of our countries' pasts continue to contribute to intangible, but very real systemic racism today, a problem that until recently has largely remained nameless. To recognise the strange disconnect that exists in conventional talks on race, think about this: most of us would probably agree that racism is a real sociological problem. However, none of us would likely consider ourselves propagators of it. How could this be possible?

This is where the phenomenon of white privilege comes in. According to Berg, the problem with talking about social inequality is that “privilege is never experienced as privilege, but marginalisation is always experienced as marginalisation.” He means that we don't see white, middle-class values as white, middle-class values. We see them as normal. Conversely, we see needs that fall outside of these values as ‘special interest’ issues that perhaps deserve attention, but not too much attention.

To illustrate how this perspective can affect political debate, Baum referred to a book recently written by Ira Katznelson, a prominent political scientist at Columbia University. The book, titled *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold Story of Racial Inequality in 20th Century America*, readdresses affirmative action with a simple argument most people don't even think of when they talk about it: the fact that affirmative action (laws that explicitly promote the prosperity of one social demographic over another) is not controversial. It has been accepted for decades—only it promoted the progression of white people.

Katznelson delineates throughout the book how discriminatory legislation governing housing, employment and electoral processes after the World Wars had far-reaching infrastructural consequences—consequences that continue to affect American society today. It's complicated, but essentially the book uses historical evidence to make readers see that dismissing affirmative action as a kind of new-age racism blinds us to the fact that American social norms are not leveled out. Further, it highlights the mirage of the post-civil rights notion that ‘serious’ racial inequalities are a thing of the past.

THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN TODAY: GUILT

The mantra of the 21st Century so far has generally been “been there, done that.” In terms of art, everything's been done. In terms of film, everything's been redone, and in terms of human rights, everything's been protested. Many people are uncomfortable talking about systemic inequalities now because—as Barbara Kay demonstrated—they make the privileged ruffle their feathers defensively or spiral into helpless guilt, and make the marginalised feel as though they're victims and complainers. Because neither side can convene on the same perception of reality, talking about these issues becomes pretty unappealing.

Getting people to talk about racial inequalities is tough, Baum admits. When he taught a class on critical theories of race, he found that students tended to fall into one of two groups: the group that looks at the history and accepts it as true (albeit problematic) and the group that perceives the course and Baum's general attitude to be ‘down on white people.’

He described how one white student came to him after class one day and explained that he came from a struggling, working-class family. “He asked me, ‘what can I do? How can I be part of the problem?’”

This is one of the complex issues surrounding race now—it doesn't seem fair to make people feel responsible for historical pasts in which they played no part. How are we supposed to address the on-

going consequences of stricken racist legislation without inciting undue alienation and guilt?

Baum said that he conceded to the student that economic class is in fact a large part of the problem, but shifting attention away from the ugly fact that race is just as entwined isn't right. Guilt happens, but it doesn't justify turning away from—or 'whitewashing'—the past. "Yeah, we didn't create this history," he said, "but white people benefit from [it]."

MARGINALISATION IN THE HERE AND NOW

As the public outcry against Michael Richards' brutal racist outburst has demonstrated, nobody sympathises with a racist. But Bercuson highlighted the subtle reality of most racist transgressions today: "The extreme manifestations of them are so obvious that you would almost consider it common sense [to recognise them.] The problem is when it gets marginal."

Everyone can recognise the injustice of active racism, such as a hate crime or a blatantly racist public statement. But what continues to go unrecognised in North America is the damaging effects of the passively accepted 'Myth of the Meritocracy:' the idea that, now that most of the archaic laws have been amended, anyone should be able to pull up their socks and get what they want, as long as they're just willing to work hard enough.

The student who stressed the limitations of class to Baum made a good point: money certainly dictates how many doors will be open in your future. But the fact remains, being poor is far more correlated with being non-white than white. In the United States, about five per cent of Caucasian families and 28 per cent of African-American families live below the poverty line. Which means that over five times as many black children are born into poverty as white children.

Because African-Americans were legally denied affordable housing until well into the 40s (by contracts called residential restrictive covenants, or 'Caucasian Codes') and illegally denied housing well into the 60s, communities in the US have evolved to be far more racially and economically segregated than people would like to admit. Put together the wealth gap, the segregated housing and fact that schools are funded by neighborhood property taxes, and you get rich neighborhoods and good education for white kids, and poor neighborhoods and poor education for black kids. Not because the laws are necessarily unfair now, and not because anybody is necessarily a *racist*, but simply because this is how American society has let itself evolve in the past 40 years, and it's still a problem.

You might be thinking to yourself, yeah, but that's the States, Canada's different. We're the happy patchwork quilt, not a chaotic melting pot. We've got lots of diversity and opportunity for everybody. But Canada is not devoid of its own racial and economic inequalities, as its Aboriginal communities know too well.

MADE IN CANADA

Dominique Clement, a human rights historian at the University of Victoria, said researching the First Nations social movement during the 20th Century is a funny thing, because there are very few documents on the topic to research.

"First Nations is interesting. There's very, very little written on First Nations human rights activism. There's this weird period between 1910 and 1969 where First Nations were not terribly politically active."

You might wonder why this might be the case. And unless you're up-to-speed on graduate-level Canadian history, you probably won't guess the real reason. It wasn't simply because First Nations were poor, or displaced, or lacked support (though these reasons obviously contributed.) It was because Aboriginal activism was explicitly against federal law.

“In the early 20th Century, Aboriginal groups formed organisations to basically call for better conditions on reserves and call for education rights and things like that,” Clement explained. “Sometime in the early 1920s, the federal government essentially criminalised and put in the Indian Act that Aboriginal groups could not form political associations and they were also not allowed to litigate land claims... That lasted until about 1969.”

So until around 1970, less than 40 years ago, Aboriginal communities were not only legally ripped apart by abusive residential schooling systems, they were also legally prohibited from publicising or protesting their circumstances. Moreover, they were unable to fight for their own land.

It's stains like these in the history of our cultural quilt that affect the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal community today, but as Berg said about the nature of historical privilege and marginalisation, privilege to the privileged is nearly invisible, while marginalisation to the marginalised is glaring.

The Indian Act has been amended and settlements for abuses in residential schools are still underway. Social support for Aboriginal communities is growing every year, but large systemic gaps in fundamental basics like housing and income still remain.

According to Clement, dealing with these issues, as well as other Canadian human rights issues in our current political climate should no longer be focused so much on legislation as it should be on education and on rectifying backlashing attitudes that continue to leak into each impressionable generation.

“At this point, people think, ‘well, we've given all these rights, we've legislated them, so we don't need to do more. People are equal.’ Human rights give us the illusion of equality... Human rights don't give us equality. What gives us equality is changing people's attitudes.”

He posed this example to illustrate his point: “You may say that women get equal pay to a man, but if male CEOs don't hire women to their boards, well then that equal pay becomes useless now, doesn't it?”

Clement, Baum, Bercuson and Berg— all prominent Canadian social scientists— agree that education and awareness of our real history, with all the racism and injustice, is key to understanding how our society works today. Because when it comes to race issues, the reason why things are ‘the way they are’ rarely, if ever, reflects solely what you think you see in front of you.

And the fact that every single specialist approached to discuss this issue (nearly ten in all) turned out to be a white man just drives the point home that much more

2 Comments »

1. Comment by Paul Evans

Great story! I know so many people who need to read it. Funny little line at the end there too.

2. Comment by Ben Simpson

I think this story was well intended - to cause people to reflect. However to the author I would put: you are probably decades behind in your focus. White as dominant will be a thing of the past in a decade or two. Ironically the cause of your focus on 'white' may have been a product of watching media with a disproportionate focus on white middle class experience - the same kind of inordinate attention so rightly decry. But consider in a pure meritocracy like Berkeley (no affirmative action is allowed at public universities in California) the school is 46% Asian, 29% White, 11% Hispanic, and 4% Black - while the breakdown for the state of California as a whole is 44% White, 35% Hispanic, 12% Asian, and 7% Black. Asians are the largest racial group in the world, I suspect if there were statistics available they would be found to be present at Canadian universities in much higher proportions than their numbers in the Canadian population as a whole. I think a more interesting question is how long it will be before affirmative action for whites, or more precisely "non-Asians" is seriously floated.

<http://www.nytimes.com/indexes/2007/01/07/education/edlife/index.html>

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