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Critical Race Theory Is the Opposite of Education

It's more of a religion. Its practitioners reject the idea of evaluating the merits of competing ideas.



By

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Pedestrians walk between Corpus Christi College and Merton College at University of Oxford, England, March 22, 2012.

PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

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I learned economics from a Marxist.

It was the height of the Cold War, a critical moment when the survival of the West seemed in doubt, an age when many people, even those under no illusions about the unfolding terror of Soviet communism, wondered whether capitalism's days might be numbered.

My tutor at a famous university in the English heartlands was one of the nation's most prominent socialist intellectuals. His works anatomized—and anathematized—the capitalist system from the traditional Marxian perspective. His wider writings championed a structuralist view of society and its institutions. He not only inveighed against the supposed moral inferiority of capitalism. He was convinced about the inevitability of its collapse under the weight of its own contradictions.



Marxist economist and Oxford Tutor Andrew Glyn.

PHOTO: W. CARLIN

But Andrew Glyn was first and foremost a teacher, an intellectually insatiable pedagogue with a desire to foster among his students a hunger for a broad understanding of the discipline. His reading list each week included the canon of classical economic thought (Adam Smith, David Hume, David Ricardo), John Maynard Keynes and his followers, and a thorough grounding in the modern neoclassical and monetarist works (F.A. Hayek and the Chicago school, Milton Friedman especially).

No thinker—no ideology—was off-limits. It was the early days of the Reagan-Thatcher counterrevolution. Neither seemed guaranteed of success at the time, and we were encouraged—in fact required—both to learn what they were doing and to understand dispassionately its intellectual origins.

Glyn was also—unexpectedly for those of us who thought communists were louche types with disdain for the protocols of petit bourgeois society—a rigid disciplinarian. Woe betide you if you hadn't done the reading each week. Obliging attempts to blame our sloth on the inherent class injustices of a medieval university system or the ennui induced by late-stage capitalism would be greeted with a thin smile and a final warning.

He believed—passionately—that his own critique of the Western system was right. But he had no intention of forcing his students onto a narrow intellectual path that would preclude the possibility of our embracing alternatives.

This is the essence of a liberal education: the nurturing and development of independent minds by erudite teachers of various ideological persuasions through exposure to the widest range of intellectual inquiry. It is what made England, and then America, the greatest force for civilizational progress the world has known.

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And it is in peril.

The crisis engulfing our institutions represents the struggle for ascendancy of an ideology that is literally the antithesis of the educational values that have driven the West's unrivaled economic, social and technological progress for the past few centuries.

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Critical race theory—and its various postmodern cousins—is not some interesting interpretation of social and political history that we are free to examine, embrace or discard. Its proponents do not seek to frame a critique of modern America to be tested alongside alternatives.

They insist that a traditionally liberal approach to evaluating the merits of competing ideas is itself an outgrowth of an illegitimate system of oppression. Rejection of their critique is the product of false consciousness, since critical thought is itself invalid, the product of white male hegemony.

This isn't really education at all, not in the sense in which the term has been understood in the post-Enlightenment era. It is closer to pre-Enlightenment religious instruction: the imparting of doctrinal truth with the practical aim of saving souls and reordering the world. Hence its migration from college campuses to K-12 schools, where its practitioners expect to find supple and more-suggestible minds. They have taken to heart the old Jesuit maxim about the first seven years of life.

There are encouraging signs that this recent migration itself may be sowing the seeds of its own destruction. Parents across the country and the political spectrum are vocally resisting. In local elections voters have seized the opportunity to oust the ideologues pushing this un-American extremism on their children.

Growing numbers of professionals, however eager to display their progressive credentials, know that they owe much of their success to a steeping in the canon of Western thought and are growing uncomfortable with the idea that their children might now be taught that Ibram X. Kendi has more to offer than John Locke or Jane Austen.

Most telling, the attempts by the ideology's defenders to redefine critical race theory suggest they know how indefensible it is. Efforts by multiple states to restrain its spread have been falsely characterized by journalists and progressives as attempts to stop children from learning about slavery and segregation. When you have to disguise your own ideology to purge it of its noxious core, you know you're losing.

I learned economics from a Marxist. But the most important thing he taught me was that open inquiry was the antidote to ruinous extremism. It's a lesson we may finally be relearning.

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