

Notes

1. For a good survey of this subject, see Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London: Routledge, 1989). For an earlier attempt to develop the views in this essay, see my "The Fixed Canon: The Maginot Line of the College Curriculum," *The American Enterprise*, September/October 1991, 14-17.
2. I discuss the tension between postmodernism and postcolonialism in my essay "Happy Days in the Veld: Beckett and Coetzee's *In the Heart of the Country*," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 93 (1994): 83-110, especially 102-106.
3. I discuss this subject at length in my essay "Tales of the Alhambra: Rushdie's Use of Spanish History in *The Moor's Last Sigh*," *Studies in the Novel* 29 (1997): 323-341.
4. For an example of this sort of criticism, see Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1989).
5. For the debate on writing in English versus writing in native tongues in postcolonial situations, see Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Curry, 1986), Chinua Achebe, "The African Writer and the English Language," in *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1976), 74-84, and Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-91* (New York: Viking, 1991), 17, 64-65.
6. See Rushdie's essay, "Hobson-Jobson," in *Imaginary Homelands*, 81-83.

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An Ideological Agenda for History

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An illustration in the *Economist* a while back depicted George Washington's face sinking off the dollar bill, leaving behind a blank, black oval. It concerned a decision in 1997 by the school board in New Orleans not to permit any building to be named after a man who owned slaves. So it is that not only Robert E. Lee and Jefferson Davis have been struck from the public square, but the George Washington Elementary School is now named the Charles Drew School, after an African American doctor who championed integration of the Army.¹

Even Mary Francis Berry, an African American feminist historian and chief player in President Clinton's civil rights office, has pronounced the New Orleans decision ridiculous and regretted the fact that students in the inner city today are often more likely to know about George Washington Carver than George Washington. Yet what appears absurd to us makes perfect sense in a theater of the absurd, which is what our schools are becoming under the impact of strident multiculturalism. Indeed, Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn fears that the pendulum may not swing back until the backlash turns violent.² Should that occur, the United States will confront a terrible Hobson's choice between surrender to the multiculturalist ideol-

ogy, in which case the America founded in 1776 will cease to exist, or a "culture Cold War" that turns hot, in which case the America founded in 1776 may likewise cease to exist.

As many observers have written, multiculturalism/feminism is a true ideology of the sort defined by Kenneth Minogue in his book, *Alien Powers*.³ I insist on merging them because, as James Kurth has cogently observed,⁴ the ethnic lobbies alone would be unable to intimidate American institutions were they not led by the powerful white professional feminist vanguard. The ideologue clings to a holistic view of the world as an arena of power and conflict between oppressors and the oppressed. The object of ideology is to unmask the oppressors and their tactics, raise the consciousness of the oppressed, overthrow the old order, and usher in a utopia ruled by the ideologues in the name of the oppressed. What the multiculturalist/feminist advocates want is precisely to overthrow the culture, hence they take the same view of scholarship as a communist or Nazi; that is, education, religion, art, and all other expressions of culture are mere superstructure, tools of indoctrination and control wielded by the ruling race, class, or gender. Culture to them is an artificial, malleable construct that is of no intrinsic importance except for its utility in the struggle for liberation.

Nor is that a paranoid canard, for all one need do is read the multiculturalist/feminists' own words. Here is a sample from a journal article entitled "Teaching History as Part of Diversity Studies." The title itself is instructive: cultural diversity is not one legitimate part of historical study, rather history is merely a part of diversity studies⁵:

An interest in history is often hard to justify to today's students. . . . But students who have never studied the slave codes of the early 18th century that . . . made it a crime for African Americans to be found walking on the streets of white towns and cities [sic—in the early 18th century?] will not be able to understand fully the implications of attacks on Black men in cities and towns all over the United States today or the deaths of Latino and Asian men who die at the hands of police officers when they routinely shoot to kill. . . . Most important, students who have never studied the history of white skin privilege, male privilege, and class privilege are in no position to tackle the complex moral and social issues that threaten to tear this society apart.

Students need to develop a sense of history. . . . This includes the understanding that . . . each of us participates in group histories that began long before we were born and continue long after we have died.

Closely related . . . is the need for a sense of the social dimension. Impatient with never-ending talk about racial justice, some white students seek to deny responsibility for addressing racism by pointing out that their ancestors did not own slaves. . . . For these students all problems and all solutions are individual. If it is not conscious and not intentional, it is not racist or sexist. . . . They need to learn to identify their own race, class, and gender privileges and to analyze them according to a model.

History tells us which individuals and groups are legitimate and which played a

role in creating America and in this way defines “us” and “them.” Implicit in the way we present history is a particular conception of community, even a set of fairly specific messages about who should be counted as an American. The ability of groups in contemporary society to get a hearing is directly linked to which interests are legitimated by the prevailing version of the past. Educators also need to understand that the way we present history provides categories, perspectives, and frameworks according to which our students learn to group, order, structure, collect, analyze, understand, and evaluate so-called facts. . . . Students who have learned to use the categories of race, class, and gender are more likely to identify issues of racism, sexism, heterosexism, and class privilege in the present.

I don’t think that needs much exegesis. Nor is it a case of one fevered feminist rattling her cage. My own examination of the original and revised *National Standards for History* produced under Gary Nash and Charlotte Crabtree at UCLA demonstrated repeatedly that in their view the purpose of historical scholarship was to promote a presentist agenda defined in terms of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation, and in so doing “liberate students from the prison of facts that makes history boring.”⁶ To provide just one illustration, the *Standards* said nothing about the nature or ideologies of fascist regimes, but instead asked students to assess American guilt for the tensions between the U.S. and Japan that led to Pearl Harbor, and whether U.S. sanctions on Japan were the real “act of war.” The lessons on World War II itself targeted the Allied delay in opening a second front, the Allied failure to respond to the Holocaust, the extent to which Norman Rockwell’s icon to the Four Freedoms was an accurate portrayal of Allied ideals in light of American racism, and the U.S. decision to drop atomic bombs on Japan. Finally, the *Standards*’ lessons on the war’s effects focused on women in the war effort, the internment of the Nisei, the anti-Hispanic “zoot suit” riots, and the contributions of African, Mexican, and Native Americans. The millions of overwhelmingly white male veterans who risked their lives to rid the world of fascism do not find mention in the *Standards*.⁷

The first textbook written to conform with the UCLA *Standards* follows suit.⁸ It devotes more space to internment of the Japanese Americans than to all the battles in Europe and the Pacific up to and including D-Day. The book parrots the UCLA notion that the United States was a syncretic product of African, Native American, and European cultures, and traces “our nation’s origins” to the Asian nomads who crossed the Bering Strait. That bizarre claim is not supported in any way, and no effort is made to draw any connection between the United States and any ancient Asians. The authors just give students a myth to imbibe, then move on to the Native Americans, who are depicted as having “highly complex” civilizations in which women often governed and humans lived in harmony with nature. No definition of “complex” is provided, no measuring stick by which students might gauge the relative complexity of societies. That is especially unfortunate because European so-

ciety in the time of Columbus receives a grand total of half of one page telling how Europeans (a) knew how to build big ships and guns and (b) were greedy. The Renaissance gets seven lines of text, and whereas the African university at Timbuktu is heralded, no mention is made of the fact that Europeans had founded some sixty institutions of higher learning by the sixteenth century. The Enlightenment receives six sentences, and no mention is made of John Locke or the intellectual heritage that inspired Jefferson (this, in a text subtitled "In the Course of Human Events"). The Reformation receives zero lines, and religion, predictably, is almost absent from this version of American history except when it can be blamed for intolerance, especially toward women.⁹

Again, one need not read into these texts a sinister *arrière-pensée*, because the multiculturalist/feminists make their motives explicit. In his new book defending the *Standards*, Gary Nash identifies himself with those

who believe that exposing students to grim chapters of our past is *essential* to the creation of informed, responsible citizens. Historians are not trying to trash America when they examine and analyze the brutality of slavery, the genocidal displacement of indigenous people, the exploitation of child labor, the frailty of national leaders, or contradictions between lofty political principles and shabby practices. Most historians are reformers by nature, and they critique the past in order to improve American society and to protect dearly won gains. . . . Only this clear-sightedness will obviate the cynicism that sugar-coated history produces when youngsters get older and recognize "the lies my teacher told me."¹⁰

What is the effect of multiculturalism on scholarship? It is to reduce historical work to polemics tricked out with footnotes, and historians to pirates flying under false colors. Now, the multiculturalist/feminists, if they are consistent, will grant that their account of the past is highly selective, "privileges" certain groups, and is meant to sensitize young people to specific issues so as to promote a specific agenda. Their rebuttal is that all history privileges someone, hence there is nothing wrong, and much right, in their campaign to overthrow a white male hegemony and its self-serving patriotic mythology. As Nash writes, "The argument is in fact between two visions of patriotic history."

I believe Nash is wrong. Once upon a time I myself was inclined to grant the multiculturalist/feminist assumption that students in the past were spoon fed a sugar-coated account of American history. But another review I recently wrote brought home to me how untrue that is. I watched all fourteen hours of the TV series, "Ken Burns Presents The West," and read the companion book (whose authors pocketed a cool \$2 million), which declared that the history of the American West had always been obscured by the triumphalist myth of brave pioneers fighting a cruel nature and savage Indians to expand America westward. Recently, it went on, another tale has been told that idealizes Indians and condemns the whites. This film, we are promised, transcends both myths. In fact, it did no such thing, but it persuaded me that the patriotic myth that

supposedly dominated frontier historiography is itself a myth. Is it really true that Americans used to romanticize the slaughter of Indians, as several recent monographs have argued? That is not how I recall the TV Westerns and Hollywood films of the 1950s and 1960s. Programs such as *Gunsmoke*, *Wagon Train*, *Broken Arrow*, *Cheyenne*, *Have Gun Will Travel*, *Kung Fu*, the supremely satirical *Maverick*, and movies such as *The Magnificent Seven* and those of Clint Eastwood invariably depicted bad whites and good ones, savage Indians and sage ones, lazy or violent Mexicans and peaceful victimized ones, devious Chinese and mystical, frankly superior ones. The whole point of the traditional Western was that most white men on the frontier were as wild as most Indians, and had to be tamed by lawmen, preachers, women, and sometimes even by Indians. Likewise, my schoolboy memories are not of a red, white, and blue history. We discussed slavery and Jim Crow, and I remember vividly the lessons on the Pullman Strike and Sacco and Vanzetti. To be sure, my teachers and textbooks honored America, but were also alive to its injustices. The multiculturalist/feminists trumpet the injustices, but dispense with the honor.

So what is the effect of multiculturalist/feminist ideology? It is to debase scholarship by imposing planted axioms and hidden or blatant false assumptions about the way things used to be, even as the Bolsheviks depicted tsarist history as even worse than it was, the Nazis parodied the decadence of the Weimar Republic, and the scholars of Meiji Japan demonized the old Shogunate. The effect is to deny the rules of evidence and logic that have made possible every human achievement of the past two thousand years. It is to deny the importance or even existence of facts, and to subject scholarly enterprise to a system in which every phenomenon can be explained, every postulate is internally consistent, and every dissent can be attributed to conscious or subliminal racism or sexism.

Our shame is that we did not see it coming. We lived our lives in the midst of a Cold War against Marxist ideology and either failed to notice the challenge within, or lacked the energy to wage yet another cultural war. Thus, during the 1980s, my colleagues and I at Berkeley were merely bemused when certain faculty turned to postmodernism, deconstruction, and radical feminism and founded journals devoted to such topics as "representations of female genitalia in Victorian Britain." It seemed silly but harmless, and in any case we took comfort in the fact that leftist historians were as contemptuous of this new history as traditionalists. But then the Soviet Empire started to crumble, and by 1988, my last year at the school, the old Marxists made a quiet alliance with the postmodernists, and the Berkeley history department has reportedly gone the way of many English departments.

What is the effect of multiculturalism/feminism on scholarship? It is also that most incoming graduate students, not to mention undergraduates, have little command of the once standard narrative of modern history and indeed contempt for those few who do. A diplomatic history graduate student at Penn,

who is fluent in Japanese and Korean and has a broad knowledge of world history, is routinely mocked for choosing an “easy” field. He tells of a graduate seminar on European imperialism in which the class was asked to deconstruct a document describing Belgian colonial policy in the Congo. The question came up: Why is this Belgian government report marked “London, 1916”? The other students fell silent. Apparently, they were not aware that a world war was raging in 1916, and that the Belgian government was in exile.

I believe that the study of history has three major functions: intellectual, civic, and moral. Properly taught, history trains young minds in evidence and logic, teaches them how to approach truth through the patient exposure of falsehood, and gives them the mental trellis they need to organize every other sort of knowledge they acquire in the humanities and sciences. To deny students history is to alienate them from their nation, culture, and species.

The civic function of history, however, would seem to conflict with the intellectual. From the ancient Israelites and Greeks to the modern nation-state, history has been used to impart reverence for the values and institutions of the state. Postmodern critics charge that to use history to promote civil or religious values amounts to brainwashing, and make vitriolic references to Catholics and Nazis. But that begs the question because, as Nash admits, all history—traditional or subversive—has a civic effect. So the real question is how teachers can fulfill the civic function of history without undue violence to its intellectual function.¹¹

Which brings us to the third, moral, function of history. If honestly taught, history is the only academic subject that inspires humility. Theology used to do that, but in our present era history must do the work of theology. It is, for all practical purposes, the religion in the modern curriculum. Teachers with a true moral compass inevitably convey to their history students a sense of the contingency of all human endeavor and the yawning gap between intentions and consequences in all human action. If a course in history does not teach such wisdom, it is not history but something else.

Samuel Johnson wrote, “If we act only for ourselves, to neglect the study of history is not prudent. If we are entrusted with the care of others, it is not just.” Under the influence of multiculturalism/feminism, history has been replaced by so-called “social studies” in the grade schools and by cultural criticism in the universities. History *qua* history is not only neglected, but dying, and the effects of that will be neither prudent nor just.

Notes

1. “Washington Vanishes,” *Economist*, 22 November 1997, 31.
2. Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, “Liberalism in America,” *The Intercollegiate Review* 33, 1 (Fall 1997): 44–50.
3. Kenneth Minogue, *Alien Powers: The Pure Theory of Ideology* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1985).

4. James Kurth, "NATO Expansion and the Idea of the West," *Orbis, A Journal of World Affairs* 41, 4 (Fall 1997): 555-67.
5. Paula Rothenberg, "Teaching U.S. History as Part of Diversity Studies," *American Behavioral Scientist* 40, 2 (November-December 1996): 134-42.
6. National Center for History in the Schools, *National Standards for World History and National Standards for United States History*, Charlotte Crabtree and Gary Nash, project co-directors (Los Angeles: UCLA, 1994). Nash quoted in "McCarthy, Seneca Falls, and History," *Wall Street Journal*, 30 December 1994.
7. See Walter A. McDougall, "Whose Standards? Whose History?" *Commentary* 99, 5 (May 1995): 36-43.
8. *United States History: In the Course of Human Events* (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Co., 1997).
9. See Walter A. McDougall, review of *United States History: In the Course of Human Events*, in *The Textbook Letter* 7, 6 (January-February 1997).
10. Gary B. Nash, Charlotte Crabtree, and Ross E. Dunn, *History on Trial: Culture Wars and the Teaching of the Past* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 15 (italics in original).
11. How does, and how ought, the civic function of history change as the composition of society changes and new groups become politically active? According to William H. McNeill, such changes are inevitable in any successful "empire" by dint of its own growing need for labor and its own powers of attraction to migratory peoples abroad. The modern Euro American "nation state" was always an ideal, not a reality, and "only in remote and barbarous lands did ethnic homogeneity prevail" (*Polyethnicity and National Unity in World History* [University of Toronto Press, 1986], 15). But the polyethnicity borne of imperial growth, whether in ancient Rome and China or North America today, inevitably erodes the appeal of the reigning "mythistory" that served to bind together the core society and move it to work and fight as one. Instead, competing "mythistories," perhaps violently opposed to each other's interpretation of the past, arise to do battle. McNeill remains optimistic because he believes that a "free market in ideas" will vindicate the most inclusive and factitious mythistories and weed out the relatively sectarian and false (see *Mythistory and Other Essays* [University of Chicago Press, 1986]). But what if the market ceases to be free and facts themselves are scorned?

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The Vaguest Measure of Faculty Merit

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I am interested above all in the question of how institutional arrangements and expectations currently shape our lives as scholars and teachers. One of the things I have most valued in my twenty-some years of college teaching has been the freedom to move in different directions, planning new courses as either student interests or my own research interests moved in particular paths. I have been acutely aware of the extraordinary degree of academic freedom enjoyed by teachers and students in this country.

My Ph.D. was in Brazilian literature, and I have been teaching in that field