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ANTI-RACISM VS. TRUE EMPOWERMENT

THE
HumanProgress
PODCAST

The rhetoric around racism has shifted immensely over the last few decades. The ideal of colorblindness, or the absence of racial prejudice, is increasingly derided in favor of "anti-racism," which emphasizes the centrality of racial identity and advocates overturning many U.S. institutions.

But will this new conception of racial justice lead to social progress?

In this episode of The Human Progress Podcast, Professor of Rhetoric Erec Smith joins Chelsea Follett to discuss some of the problems with anti-racist rhetoric and how we can pursue true empowerment through classical liberal ideas.

Watch the interview [here](#).

Or, listen to the [audio](#).

Below is an edited and abridged transcript featuring some highlights from the interview.

How has rhetoric about race changed in recent years in the United States?

I think the biggest difference is our inability to talk across differences. People have stopped even trying these days. You'll often hear that people with the most radical ideas refuse to explain or debate them. They think it's a waste of time, and they also think it may be dignifying the other side with a response.

The major players in critical race theory have lost faith in liberal values like reason and dialogue. They argue those values maintain the status quo. And I can sympathize with that; it gets frustrating when changes don't come quickly enough. At the same time, if you get rid of a belief in deliberation and the primacy of reason, society will devolve into something worse. A lot of people don't seem to mind that. They think society needs to fall to be rebuilt into something better. But I believe in reform. I believe in the power of civil debate, and that's why I'm fighting for it.

What are some of the problems with the current rhetoric about race?

It's disempowering. Microaggressions are a good example. It's not empowering to be told that there's harm around every corner, that words are harmful, and that if somebody asks a question, it's always already racist.

In critical social justice, the question isn't "Did racism happen?" It's "How did it manifest in that situation?" So, racism is always already in the air. Somehow, our conversation right now is racist. That is a problem. But of course, if you're trying to usurp power by using the evil of racism, then the more racism, the better, which is why you get people making \$20,000 to talk for an hour on Zoom. You get Ibram Kendi proposing a department of anti-racism at a government level.

Let's get into your book, *A Critique of Anti-racism in Rhetoric and Composition: The Semblance of Empowerment*. What do you mean by the primacy of identity?

It's all about me and who I am rather than higher ideals or other people's experiences. By extension, you can't ask questions. You have to always believe stories instead of asking for elaboration or clarification. And the more downtrodden you are, the more credibility you have. I am black, which gives me credibility, but I'd have more credibility if I was a black woman or a black woman who was disabled.

Tell me about what you call the sacred victim and the semblance of empowerment.

The sacred victim is this idea that being the victim gives you special status, to the point where being a victim is beneficial. "I'm being victimized, therefore, I'm the protagonist in this story, therefore, you need to listen to me, or else you're a bad person." If you can prove your victimization, it gives you a sense of power.

In my field particularly, students are told they're being oppressed by being taught standard English. But standard English is a valuable tool. You're not replacing a dialect; you're adding a dialect you can use if it comes in handy. So, rejecting standard English feels like you're sticking it to the man, but really, you're hurting yourself. So it's a semblance of empowerment.

What is true empowerment?

I abide by empowerment theory, which defines empowerment as the confluence of three components.

The first is intrapersonal, which is how you talk to yourself, self-regulate, manage your emotions, be mindful, and things like that. The second component is interactive or interactional empowerment, which is knowing your context and acting accordingly. Now, if your intrapersonal empowerment is intact, you're better able to be interactional because you're not projecting your anxieties onto the present situation. The third component is behavioral empowerment, which means how do we work together? How do we find common goals, even if we may be different?

According to this theory, you need all three to be truly empowered. And I think that's missing from a lot of anti-racist pedagogy, especially the intrapersonal component. Even the most well-intentioned diversity trainers skip that one. We need to look at self-awareness first and foremost, and we're not doing that.

Can you tell me about what you refer to as the soft bigotry of anti-racist pedagogy?

The most egregious example is the equitable math movement, which states that expecting black students to get the right answer is inherently racist. Teaching, the teacher knowing the knowledge and instilling it into the students, that's somehow racist as well because it's paternalistic. Those are just two of the more mind-blowing tenets of equitable math that show the soft bigotry of anti-racist pedagogy. In general, it's the demonization of rigor and merit when it comes to students of color, but not other students.

Let's get into solutions. What kind of rhetoric would you like to see more of to promote genuine empowerment and tolerance?

Two things. One, I want to instill the empowerment theory I was talking about earlier and have people develop heuristics for exploring oneself, exploring one's environment, and working with others.

Two, we need to reemphasize and make explicit classical liberal values. Classical liberalism is social justice if you do it right. There needs to be an explicit movement reemphasizing the primacy of reason, individuality, free speech, and deliberative democracy. We can't just assume that these ideas are in the air. We have to assume that people don't know about them and be upfront and direct about their value, especially individuality and free speech since we're now steeped in racial essentialism and the idea that words are violence.

If words are harmful, then people will stop communicating because why even risk it? A lot of the implicit bias training makes things worse because people learn that they should just shut up. I think that's a huge problem in a country that is self-defined as a place of free speech.

You recently wrote: "Happy and successful people don't revolt, and one's ability to adapt correlates to one's ability to be happy and successful." Can you expand on this idea?

Adaptation is about gauging a situation and acting accordingly. However, in my field, adaptation is considered a bad thing. It's looked at as submitting to an audience that expects you to talk in a certain way. To ask a black person to adapt is white supremacy.

Unfortunately, these ideas are picking up speed. Education and rhetoric are a way of helping people navigate through the world and negotiate situations. If you say that negotiation is just succumbing to white supremacy, then you're disempowering people. And disempowered people are more likely to be unhappy and unsuccessful and, therefore, willing to revolt.

Is that the motivation? Do teachers want to disempower students to persuade them to join their ideological movement?

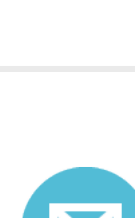
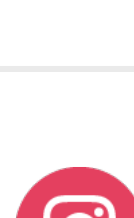
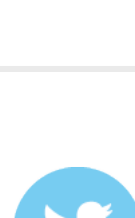
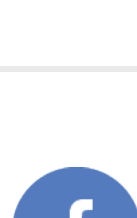
Yes. I know that sounds like a conspiracy theory, but there's a prominent figure in my field who said that black students who want to learn standard English are being selfish and immature because if they learn skills that will help them succeed in the current system, their success will help maintain the status quo, and that's a bad thing. So yes, it's real, especially in my field.

How do you find the motivation to pursue classical liberal ideas which, in some circles, have fallen out of favor?

A few years ago, I was attacked on the prominent listserv in my field for saying we shouldn't discourage students from learning standard English or say that the very presence of white professors is a problem. I was attacked by people who I thought were my friends and colleagues.

I took that frustration and anger and channeled it into creating all the things I've created since, my books, my articles, my work with Free Black Thought, and all kinds of different things. Instead of having all that silence me, which was the point, I became louder. So that's how I keep going. Whenever I get tired, I just think of all the people who tried to hurt me, and I say, "Well, I'll show them."

Read the full transcript [here](#).



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