

What Happens Next – Sunday May 16, 2021

Food Addiction, Amazon, Good Stagnation, ESG, and Racial Indoctrination

Paul Rossi

Larry Bernstein: Let's go on to our final speaker. Paul Rossi. Paul is a former math teacher at the Grace Church School in New York City. He will speak now about teaching race to children.

Paul Rossi: Since I published the article Very White on Substack, I got really interested in what this anti-racist pedagogy was doing at earlier and earlier grades. So I did an analysis of the types of anti-racist education in elementary schools. And I wanted to focus on one particular aspect of that, which was the identity formation or what's called identity work. And this is going on at thousands of schools across the country I think now, and it's really exploded since the murder of George Floyd. I'm sure for many of the parents in the audience today, this will be familiar to you. And this identity work is based on a theory called intersectionality. So intersectionality concerns the multifaceted ways that individuals are perceived by society and the impact of those perceptions on success outcomes.

So for example, Pollyanna, Inc. Is a popular educational consultancy. It's used by many independent schools in New York and across the country and it has a proprietary racial literacy curriculum and this racial identity work starts in kindergarten. So there's eight lessons for each grade and kindergarten level students are taught to see color as defining for characters in children's stories. So they have stories that are like Brown Bear Brown Bear, what do you see? Red as a dragon? Green is a chili pepper. And in this way, children are introduced and taught to name and their own skin color and identify surface level similarities and differences. And by the end of kindergarten, teachers who feel confident to do so are urged to explicitly tie this color awareness to racial identity. This is framed as an advanced activity, something that teachers supposed to aspire to, but not push for too early. But ultimately, they're going to do that when the students are ready for it.

In later grades, these identity wheel exercises develop a further understanding of these socialized identity. The way this works is the child places his name and personality traits in the center and then once that core has been established, the main focus really takes place. Which is, labeling wedges or spheres in this outer ring, which focus on the group characteristics like race, class, gender, disability, status, etc., and the participants will share and discuss the content in these orbiting circles.

The geometry of these wheels and the far greater time spent on their periphery, reinforce this priority that the externally and social constructed aspects of the self-expressed as group membership are what's really important.

Back to specifically with Pollyanna and the 6th grade curriculum, they ask students to revise Webster's definition of identity which is, quote, "The distinguishing character or personality of an individual," by highlighting these external and group markers of identity. So teachers are told to encourage sociological identity markers and ideas and students to think about their physical and social identities as well as their inner world.

So what's prioritized, again, as salient is always the group categorization often based on how you're perceived in society. The way I think about it is that if the self is an Apple, the implications from these activities and that the most important part of who you are is the skin. Students are urged to treat each other's multifaceted social identities with empathy, kindness, and acceptance, which are all very important, but absent are the many other defining personal and practical virtues, characteristic of healthy growth, such as emotional resilience, conscientiousness, industriousness, consistency, loyalty, fidelity, persistence under adversity, patience, and temperance in the face of opposing views.

Once defined by these group markers, the individual feels pressured to internalize politicized ideas, beliefs, and priorities that are attributed to these groups. So faith in one's individual attributes as a bridge to success is transferred into faith in solidarity with the perceived group identity and it's goal. So in this way, the locus of identity moves from the internal and the individual to the external and the collective. As students gain a deeper understanding of how racist policies influenced our history and present day disparities, their now externally based identities are now tied to power and privilege.

So this is the next stage of the game. To illustrate that, I'm going to quote from the website of the DEI consultancy called the Nova Collective, and this is characteristic of this rhetorical move which many of these consultancies do. Quote, "Things we hold that don't impact the way we receive resources or gain access or privileged society are seen as personal identity and those things that lump us into groups and either give us power and privilege in society or inhibit power and privilege in society, those are seen as social identities."

So this quote is illustrative because it implies there's this hierarchy of significance. The social takes priority over the personal, which is defined

in the negative. Social identity establishes one's value in the world, which has inscribed, defined and characterized that individual.

And most remarkably to me, the personal character, the personal identity is reduced to a kind of fanciful pigment, which has no influence or impact on how we gain access to resources in society. Furthermore, now that personal identity has been dispensed with, a moral valence can be ascribed to one's social identity. And the way this works is that the power of the people with certain social identities enjoy over others, based on solely the perception in the world, is therefore arbitrary. It's unrelated to personal agency, competency and choice, and therefore it's unfair and demanding of redress.

So, what does "content of our character" as a phrase even mean when that's defined as irrelevant or defined out of existence? At this point, you've now taken that external locus of identity and it's become an external locus of control. Research suggests that people with an internal locus of control are more adept at navigating intellectual and moral challenges. Whereas, external tend to feel they have less control over their fate, they're more stressed, they're more prone to clinical depression. And, external locus of control also correlates with something called "identity foreclosure", a concept developed by James Marcia. "It's a stage of identity in which an individual fetishists a fixed identity but hasn't explored other options or ideas."

This is most common in young adolescents. And at this stage the individual has just adopted simplistic traits and qualities and people with foreclosed identities correlate highly with measures of authoritarianism and ideological rigidity. So my thinking is that, having witnessed this at the school I taught at, is that this anti-racist identity work by setting an external locus for identity exacerbates these outcomes.

We live in a world where narcissism, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation are all on the rise among adolescents. I suspect there's also a connection between this kind of identity work, which is now common in schools. And the existential eraser that many young people and even people in college feel when their peers fail to, say, use their preferred pronouns, or when they don't see a representation of "people who look like them" in art, culture and institutional settings. So by transferring your identity to this external group identity, then you're dependent on society to perceive you a certain way. And if that becomes arbitrary or ambivalent, that is, I think, of terrible existential threat for children who've been raised by this type of pedagogy.

Which, in some ways it has a lot to do with race, but in some ways it's independent, particularly in race. But I'm really hopeful that future researchers will shed more light on this question. My personal feeling and the real essence of my objection to anti-racist pedagogy, the way it's practiced today, is that race is a falsehood. We know that race is a falsehood. We know that we live in a racist society where racism exists and it's carried through in monstrous ways, historically. But when you focus on creating and recreating, reifying identities around this false construct, you create a kind of learned helplessness around it.

I really think that there is not a lot of evidence. I have looked for it and I haven't seen the kind of evidence for the effectiveness of this so-called "anti-racism". I don't understand how you can have an anti-racism that is "pro race". I understand the rationale for it, but I don't think it's effective. And my experience with it is that it promotes resentment, futility, and depression.

I suggest we return to a kind of anti-racism that is truly anti-race, that it asserts that race is a fiction, but emphasizes racial de-identification, stressing instead the power of personal virtues and agency in overcoming a disparate outcome.