

Interdisciplinarity, Without a Politic, To Engage the Fierce Urgency of Now?

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I am not sure what the role of philosophers qua philosophers is in the “fierce urgency of now.” So, I thank Austin Pickup for his thoughtful consideration of the question in this important struggle to keep the power of philosophy relevant. The fierce urgency of now comes about, as Austin notes from Martin Luther King, Jr., because of “the fact that tomorrow is today.”¹ But today seems increasingly more like yesterday. White supremacist movements, urged on by the new Republicans of Trump, spread across the nation, some more violent than others, but all toward the same end of anti-truth. In 2017, Noam Chomsky argued that the Republican party is the most dangerous organization on earth. Amen.

Let’s take the current most obvious issue. At the time of this writing, five states—Florida, Arkansas, Idaho, Oklahoma, and Alabama—have banned the teaching of critical race theory (CRT) in K-12 schools. At least another dozen states are debating whether to do so. In Alabama, the ban took the form of a resolution passed by the State Board of Education with the requisite double-speak header: “Alabama State Board of Education Resolution Declaring the Preservation of Intellectual Freedom and Non-Discrimination in Alabama’s Public Schools.”² What the State Superintendent described as a “deep dive” into the curriculum led to the conclusion that CRT was not being taught in any schools in the state. If CRT is not being taught in schools, then why the mass hysteria around banning it? This hysteria is even more egregious when several Alabama legislators, for example, are currently working on bills that would ban the teaching of CRT not only in K-12 schools but also in institutions

of higher education. A synopsis of AL HB 11, to be introduced in early 2022, reads:

This bill would prohibit public K-12 schools and public institutions of higher education and their employees from teaching certain concepts regarding race or sex, such as critical race theory . . . This bill would also require public K-12 schools and public institutions of higher education to terminate the employment of any employees who violate its provisions.³

While the Alabama School Board resolution does not name CRT specifically, that is clearly the target of the resolution. The overarching argument in both the Resolution and the proposed legislation is that CRT violates the premises of individual rights, equal opportunity, and individual merit. Of course, this also forbids teaching other concepts beyond CRT, such as white privilege which the legislation refers to as “stereotyping.” The law prohibits teaching that “this state or the United States is fundamentally racist or sexist.” While the Bill specifically marks one of the intents “to prohibit the introduction of certain courses or units of study,” it goes on to note that we must “respect the dignity of others, acknowledge the right of others to express differing opinions, and foster and defend intellectual honesty, freedom of inquiry and instruction, and freedom of speech and association. Here we witness even more obvious double-speak wherein white supremacist censorship somehow leads to freedom of inquiry. But, of course, educators are permitted, per another pre-filed bill in Alabama, to discuss “divisive concepts in an objective manner.”⁴ One such concept is, obviously, racism. Ok. What are the pros and cons of racism? Discuss.

In light of the existential threats, as Austin notes, to justice, society, and humanity (and I would add, now, truth, academic freedom, and

education for democracy), Austin is concerned that we (philosophers) will be too late and that philosophy is ill-equipped to respond to this fiercely urgent moment. I think philosophers of education have been engaged all along in the sticky matters of the day. So, it's not that we are too late; it's that we have been rendered irrelevant, along with our colleagues in other fields, including previously unimpeachable fields such as medicine. I think Austin is right, for example, that one of the reasons our response to the pandemic has been disastrous is "because what is required to mitigate it runs counter to prevailing American ideology" wherein personal liberty has overtaken social cohesion.

Here we should look more carefully at how ideology functions. Thompson outlines five general modes through which ideology can operate: legitimation, dissimulation, unification, fragmentation, and reification.⁵ These are not mutually exclusive and, typically, function simultaneously, increasing the power of ideological hegemony. In regard to white supremacist censorship and anti-truth campaigns, I suggest, drawing Thompson's definitions, that four of these modes, if not all five, are in full swing in this urgent moment:

1. *Unification* is the process of creating collective entities, usually in opposition to a real or imagined enemy. CRT is a perfect bogeyman and serves the purpose of manufacturing a culture war around which people on the political right can unite. After all, as the argument goes, teaching about race and racism is divisive.

2. As the right unifies around their new bogeyman, their power and willingness to engage in clearly contradictory arguments (as noted above) has increased. *Dissimulation* is when the unified group can effectively deny, hide, or obscure relations of domination. This is seen in the strategic double-speak toward the goal of censorship. From this follows the effective end of historical fact or, at least, censorship of key academic tools to understanding both history and contemporary society.

3. The unification of the right is not met with a similar level of unification of the left. *Fragmentation* divides any potential opposition, decreasing its effect. Fragmentation in this case is aided by dominant political ideological formations such as personal liberty, the example raised by Austin. But other ideological commitments are also weapons here such as the myth of meritocracy.

4. The myth of meritocracy suggests that no one is holding you back; What “structures”? You are free to do whatever you choose. Here we see dissimulation and fragmentation working symbiotically. This symbiosis, then, helps to *reify* unequal social structures which are represented as being natural or inevitable: The United States is not fundamentally racist. It was not built on racism. That is *just* how history played out.

How these modes of ideology are functioning is, of course, somewhat speculative, and more empirical support is necessary. But as regards unification and fragmentation for example, consider a recent survey by Politico/Morning Consult. It is, first, important to point out that 39% of Democrats and 30% of Republicans reported having never heard of CRT. I think that is important since more Republicans are getting more messaging from somewhere about CRT than Democrats. More importantly, 48% of Republicans hold a somewhat (6%) or very (42%) unfavorable view of CRT. Only 32% of Democrats hold a very (14%) or somewhat (18%) favorable view of CRT.⁶ In other words, Republicans are much more unified against CRT than Democrats are unified in favor of it. Austin asks us “What does the ‘fierce urgency of now’ demand of philosophers of education?” Given the discussion above, I would ask a related but perhaps more pointed question: How do philosophers address “the ongoing assault on truth in public discourse and policy” when it is packaged in basic ideological commitments and delivered by a bogeyman that foments the modes of ideological functioning?⁷ Sug-

gested in this question is that I think this is a more entrenched problem than a “a crisis in public discourse,” even as they are clearly related.

This is not to say that philosophers, therefore, have nothing to say or cannot contribute. It is to say that if it is the case that “the nature of philosophical inquiry does not lend itself well to urgent calls for action,” then a more entrenched problem will lead even more readily to “a detachment from practical experience into theoretical inquiry.”⁸ Moreover, with such entrenched ideological problems, philosophers, even when they connect to practice and practical experience, only have incremental success and usually at the individual level by moving teachers toward more critical approaches to their classrooms. Of course, they must still function within the institution of school that undermines criticality.⁹ Consider the neoliberal assault on education that Austin raises in his paper. For decades now, philosophers of education have offered both theoretical/philosophical accounts of this condition as well as practical recommendations, mostly to no avail. Charter schools have taken hold in the name of competition almost everywhere, an increasing number of charter schools are run by for-profit EMOs, more voucher programs will be soon to follow, and the standards and accountability movement remains alive and well. Oh, and Texas still has a law requiring teachers to stress the superiority of American capitalism over all other economies.

To his credit, Austin sees a way forward for philosophers of education to contribute despite the many factors that constrain possibilities. But might it be the case that we are victims of our own success? For example, let’s take the idea that our concern for the Other requires “rejecting the notion of a fixed and calculable understanding of justice.”¹⁰ For many years, the left has been making this very kind of argument regarding deconstruction, alternate points of view, different ways of seeing the same thing, etc. We did so, in part, to penetrate the fixity of truth from the right. But the right is so much better at co-opt-

ing ideas from the left that the result of our own discourse was to open the way for the ridiculous to take hold: alternative truths. Plato's realm of the shadows is now equal to the realm of the light. Could that be because we declined to point to the light too frequently?

The new academic mantra of interdisciplinarity and border crossing that Austin goes on to recommend is appealing. It makes sense that such invitations might lead to taking alternative routes that "open up possibilities for engagement with the urgency of the present."¹¹ The genealogical pragmatism of clarifying the problems and understanding their historical contextualization, must involve critical-normative work, as Austin points out, drawing on Koopman. But what is missing here, it seems to me, is a politic that drives such normative work. While I agree with Austin that the problematizing work of deconstruction is also necessary, a politic would require that we pay much more attention to how that work can serve to undermine, and I think it has, as pointed out above, critical-normative work. The left, in fact, effectively changed some of the discourse, to its detriment, because it was coopted by ideology. The solution is *more* strategic fixity combined with problematization. As Austin revisits the case of the teacher teaching about racism at the end of his piece, I would say, on the one hand, that certainly "a problematization of these ideas could do much to properly contextualize and diagnose such a situation in view of informing possible solutions."¹²

On the other hand, in this political climate, it is unlikely to dissuade the complaining parents. With time and instruction, current and pre-service teachers can come to understand the fiction of the "neutral curriculum," and they already, for the most part, believe that they should not be seen as mere managers or technicians, even as they are called into being as such in many ways within the material confines of the school. So, this is not where the problem lies. It lies outside of schools. It lies outside of our intimate connections with our students in our classrooms,

even as our work there must continue since philosophers of education are best positioned to inform such issues. Nevertheless, the problem lies, going back to where I began this response, in the politics that will increasingly forbid by legal means that which Austin recommends. Yes, “the fierce urgency of now demands a responsive attitude of ‘thinking what the known demands of us’” and perhaps crossing borders affords possibilities.¹³ But that is simply not enough to penetrate the hold that a perverted ideology has taken on our society and political leaders.

1 Austin Pickup, “What Does the ‘Fierce Urgency of Now’ Demand of Philosophers of Education?” *Philosophy of Education* 77:4, 2022, para 14.

2 Alabama State Board of Education, “Alabama State Board of Education Resolution Declaring the Preservation of Intellectual Freedom and Non-Discrimination in Alabama’s Public Schools”, August 2021. Available at <https://www.alabamaachieves.org/state-board-of-education/adopted-resolutions/>

3 Danny Crawford, Public education, prohibits teaching of divisive concepts relating to race and sex, prohibits classification of students based on race, penalties, January 11, 2022. Available at <https://legiscan.com/AL/bill/HB11/2022>.

4 Chris Pringle and Arnold Mooney, Education, prohibits public K-12 schools and public institutions of higher education from teaching certain divisive concepts relating to race or sex, January 11, 2022. Available at <https://legiscan.com/AL/text/HB8/2022>

5 John B. Thompson, *Ideology and Modern Culture: Critical Social Theory in the Era of Mass Communication*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990.

6 Eli Yokley, “Many GOP Voters Hold Strong Views on Critical Race The-

ory. Democrats? Not So Much,” *Morning Consult*, June 23, 2021. Available at <https://morningconsult.com/2021/06/23/critical-race-theory-polling/>

7 Austin Pickup, “What Does the ‘Fierce Urgency of Now’ Demand of Philosophers of Education?” *Philosophy of Education* 77:4, 2022.

8 Austin Pickup, “What Does the ‘Fierce Urgency of Now’ Demand of Philosophers of Education?”

9 John E. Petrovic, *Unschooling Critical Pedagogy, Unfixing Schools*. New York: Routledge, 2019.

10 Austin Pickup.

11 Pickup.

12 Pickup.

13 Pickup.