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National museum schools us on “whiteness” – and other puzzling theories

By Steve Bakke  August 8, 2020



The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of African American History and Culture

Every news report, most conversations, and too many of our personal thoughts deal with race and racial turmoil. All things, good or bad, seem to be viewed through a racial lens. While my college years were filled with racial tension, this feels quite different. Martin Luther King, a legend and hero, was assassinated a few weeks before my 1968 college graduation. He taught us we should look beyond race, the opposite of what's happening now.

Historian Victor Davis Hanson recently wrote that in the '60s, protests were for racial assimilation and integration. MLK's agenda was “making race incidental, not essential. Not so with today's cultural revolution. It seeks to ensure that racial difference is the foundation of American life, dividing the country between supposed non-white victims and purported whited victimizers, past and present.”

Whiteness has become “a crime of the times” and the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History and Culture recently created a new webpage exhibit, “Aspects & Assumptions of Whiteness & White Culture in the United States.” Now, hold firmly onto your chair.

With “whiteness” now a transgression, here are some things the exhibit identified as characteristics of whiteness and white culture: rugged individualism; nuclear family structure; emphasis on scientific method and objective thinking; and protestant work ethic. There were several more. This was a chart displayed when the online exhibit opened. Because of the controversial nature, it's been removed.

Why was it part of the exhibit in the first place? Not all of the characteristics were admirable, but those mentioned would strike many people as being reflective of our national values. Taken as a whole, the list would strike most people as mostly complimentary. I'd hate to think this was someone's veiled attempt to lower the bar of traditional American values. Alternatively, one could also wonder if a white supremacist had a hand in its development.

Some critics considered the exhibit offensive for whites and blacks alike. White people would receive the message that characteristics, many commonly considered admirable, are major causes

of racial tensions and are objects of shame. For black people, the implication is that these mostly desirable attributes are not typically shared by black or brown citizens. Either way, this type of “over-analysis” is sure to sow greater racial division.

This wasn't the Museum's first experience with fielding accusations of bias in their featured content. When it first opened, many were surprised there was no exhibit featuring the career of Supreme Court Associate Justice Clarence Thomas. It's more of a surprise when one learns they did pay tribute to Anita Hill who tried to block his confirmation with charges of sexual harassment.

There have been some other black Americans who have been overlooked – virtually all conservative, including : Edward Brooke, the first African American to be elected to the U.S. Senate by popular vote; and Alveda King, niece of Martin Luther King Jr.; and prominent economists Thomas Sowell and Walter Williams. Those all seem like reasonable candidates considering Black Lives Matter is represented in the Museum.

So, here I find myself, faced with an acclaimed cultural project that seemed to be an attempt at tarnishing several human attributes I consider admirable. How could someone buy that? I'm also confused by other things, such as the myriad of gender choices. And then recently, someone asked me if this world is so crazy that soon we might learn that two plus two doesn't “necessarily” equal four. I actually did receive that query.

Well, guess what! Last week I came across an article, “Does mathematics equal western imperialism?” by Nancy Pearcey, professor and scholar in residence at Houston Baptist University. She's also concerned. She quotes an Illinois education professor, Rochelle Gutierrez, who wrote that “mathematics itself operates as whiteness.” Professor Gutierrez “charges that algebra and geometry perpetuate white privilege because the textbook version of math history is Eurocentric.” Professor Pearcey also quotes a teacher and PH.D. student, a self-described “change agent,” recently tweeting “The idea of 2+2 equaling 4 is cultural,” a product of “western imperialism/colonialism.” Where'd that come from?

That's the end of my story. Can anyone explain to me the logic of this? No wonder we're so mixed up and divided as a nation.