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Critical thinking: Will it be a victim of Critical Race Theory?



By Steve Bakke  June 18, 2021

Educator Steve Backus recently authored a remarkably interesting and relevant commentary titled “The dea(r)th of critical thinking.” Backus is Director of the Rose Warner Writing and Critical Thinking Center at the College of Saint Scholastica in Duluth Minnesota. His comments appeared in the Minneapolis StarTribune.

Backus described his concern with these words: “Critical thinking simply means drawing an objective conclusion from a set of facts.....I teach critical thinking. Or try to, anyway. It’s a tough job; most students want nothing to do with it. They think it involves conflict, which is taboo in our culture. They also don’t care if something makes sense or not. We see this happening in our everyday lives and it’s a bit disturbing. Let’s face it: America’s critical thinking skills are toast.”

That dramatic conclusion provides a sense of finality. Nevertheless, Backus experienced at least limited renewed hope by observing students being uncharacteristically laser focused on arriving at objective fact-based conclusions during the George Floyd murder trial.

Critical thinking has numerous definitions, and they all revolve around ideas such as: rational, skeptical, unbiased analysis, or evaluation of factual evidence. The goal is to form an “objective” conclusion.

Backus is observing what I think is a new attitude in America, particularly in our education system. There’s a old but energized movement afoot. It’s opposing, and thereby effectively discouraging, objectivity. Dedicated CRT advocate and leader, Ibram X. Kendi wrote this in his book “How to be an antiracist”: “I thought I was stupid, too dumb for college.....intelligence is as subjective as beauty.....I kept using ‘objective’ standards, like test scores and report cards, to judge myself.”

During a recent forum including Ibram X. Kendi and antiracism leader and journalism scholar William Jalani Cobb, these men pointed out that journalistic objectivity comes from a history of reporting one person’s claims, then reporting the opposing side. Contrary to what’s best for journalism, they encourage budding journalists to prioritize “fairness” over “objectivity.”

That instruction is very nuanced and difficult to understand or accomplish. It begs some questions: What is meant by “fairness”? Do we want news reporters making subjective judgements as to fairness? If not, who should be designated as the ultimate judge and authority on the subject?

Smithsonian’s African American History Museum exhibited an unflattering series of charts listing “whiteness” characteristics. These included two interesting characteristics: emphasis on scientific method and objective thinking. In fact, many of the other characteristics listed on the charts are commonly considered favorable national values. Due to its controversial nature and overwhelming push-back, the exhibit was short lived.

Kendi and Cobb are “antiracism” leaders, and Kendi’s book became a philosophical “shot-in-the-arm” for the controversial Critical Race Theory (CRT) used in developing school curricula. The museum exhibit I described was a CRT project. Another example of CRT comes from Oregon’s Department of Education. They’ve begun training math teachers to deemphasize “finding the right answer.” Valuing an emphasis on accuracy is considered a manifestation of “whiteness” or perhaps even “white supremacy.”

Now, I’m going to risk appearing a bit sophomoric. Is America ready to say “begone Socrates”? He’s the guy who, about 2500 years ago, introduced and emphasized “seeking evidence, closely examining reasoning and assumptions, analyzing basic concepts, and tracing out implications.....” (quote from *The Foundation of Critical Thinking*). “And while you’re on your way to obscurity, Mr. Socrates, you might as well take your buddies Plato, Aristotle, and St. Thomas Aquinas with you.”

OK, I admit my drama is a bit silly, but please understand the point I’m making – CRT isn’t merely critiquing these ancient fellows and their ideas. Rather CRT is making good on its habit of simply “canceling” anybody it disagrees with.

Sadly, CRT seems to be rejecting the value of objectivity, and by extension, critical thinking. Whether he realizes it or not, Backus is competing against CRT, and it’s going to be a difficult up-hill battle. If Backus and those like him are unsuccessful, critical thinking will be sorely missed. Current and future generations will be denied the benefit of important traditional sources and methods of gaining knowledge and arriving at reasonable conclusions.